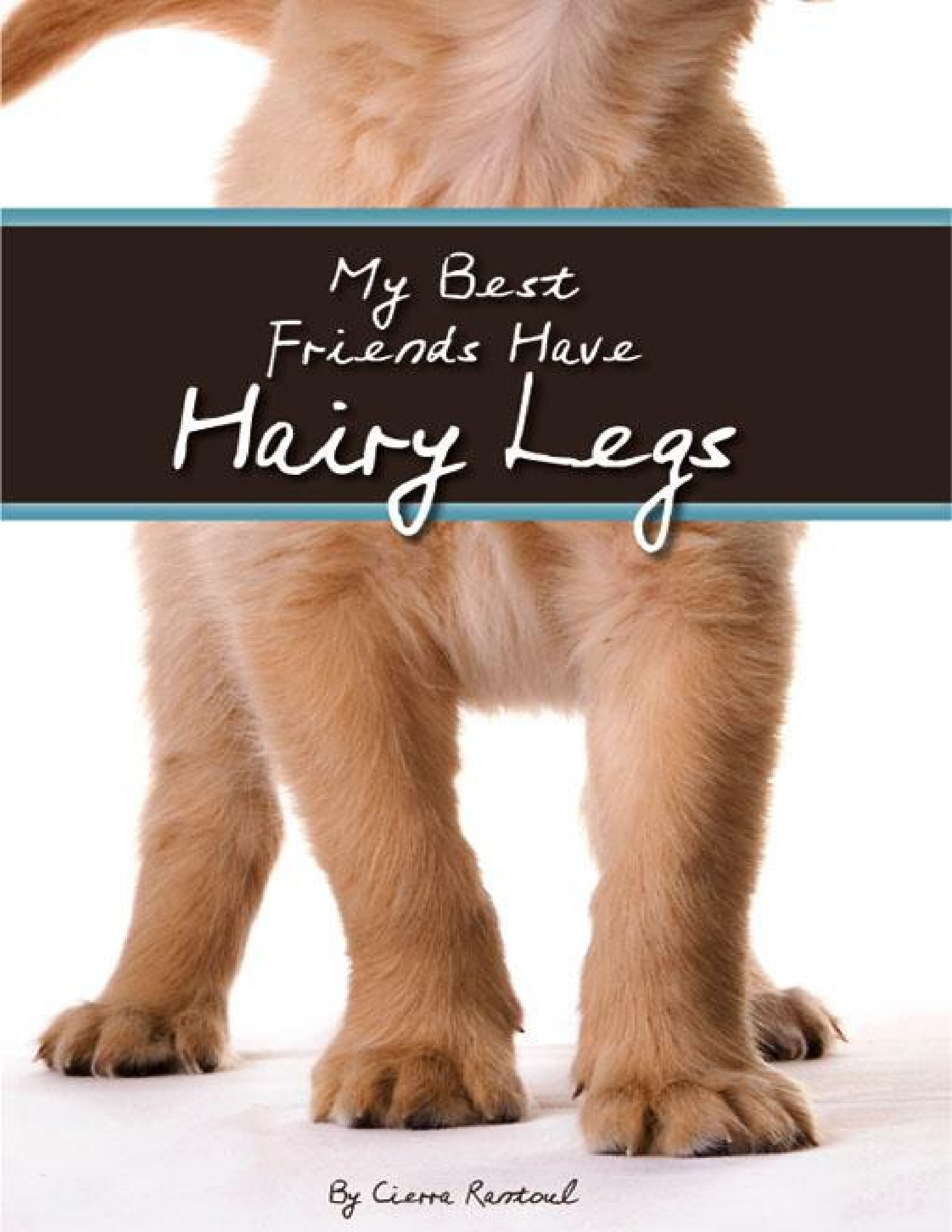
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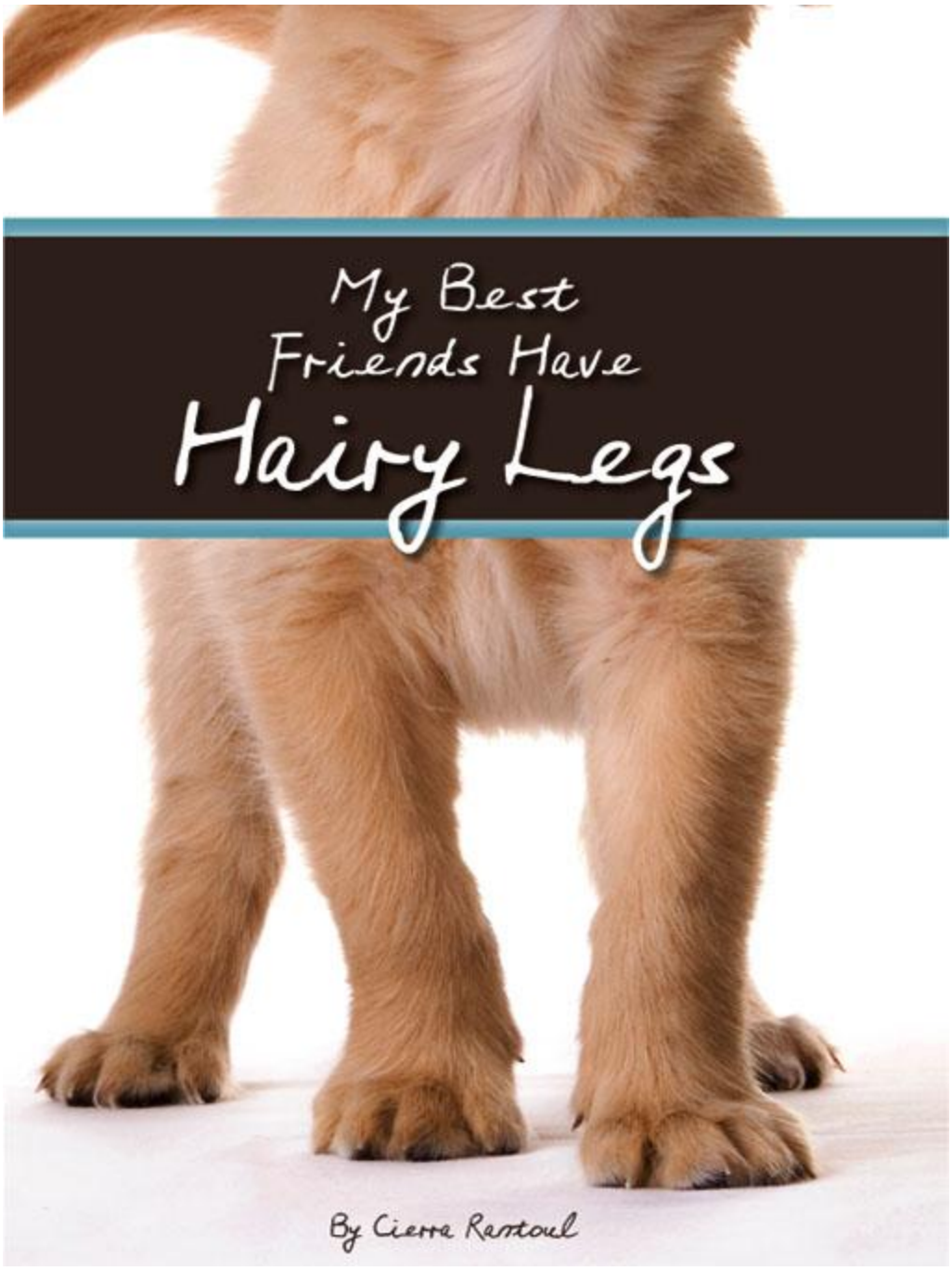
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PREFACE

“My Best Friends have Hairy Legs” is the story of how my dog, Trooper, and I overcame abuse and bad marriages and learned to trust again. Trooper was a Humane Shelter puppy—one of the phrases they used on the t-shirts they sold for fundraising is where the title of the book comes from. In the process of helping him learn to trust men again, I have reached a point where I feel ready to trust again myself. While my two-legged soul mate has not yet come into my life, I am confident that with the love of the four-legged soul mate in my life I will not be lonely and I will be ready when he does arrive. As much as this is a story about Trooper’s growth from a fearful puppy to a confident adult dog—it is also my story—my growth from being a psychologically abused wife into a confident woman who can look back at my past with laughter and with no regrets.

Almost all the names of people have been changed. The facts are true as I remember them and as I occasionally wrote in my journal. The decision to change names was not so much to protect the “innocent” but because I wanted my story to be anyone’s story. I don’t believe my story is that unique because I have heard from many women who have been in abusive relationships or who suffer from low self-esteem. Our stories might differ, the details change, but the emotions and feelings are the same.

I wanted to tell my story—our story—because we have survived to come out on the other side of it. I wanted to tell it to give hope to others who are struggling to find their way. There is a light within you. Find it. Be it. Share it.

There aren’t any bras burnt at the end of this book—or dog collars—but the metaphor is the same. We are happy with who we are.

Chapter 1

Wearing Blinders

I hadn't planned on getting a second dog. Especially a dog that would weigh 70+ lbs. by the time he was full grown. I already had a full house with four cats and a pug that had frequent health problems. So when Marc, the man I had just started dating said that he wanted to get a puppy for his son, Ryan, who was with him for the summer, I really didn't consider the possibility that I would be adding to my own clan. Little did I know…

I met Marc in April when I was working a part-time second job at a major department store. I worked on the floor selling appliances and he worked in the stockroom. I had asked the night phone operator what he was like since I had seen them talking quite a bit and before I knew it, she was trying to play matchmaker.

Marc was quiet and very shy. He was six years younger than me, and had been in the Air Force for nine years by then. His marriage had only recently ended. He and his ex-wife had married when she got pregnant. Eleven years later while he was on a solo military assignment in Korea, his wife had moved her boyfriend into the house. When he came home on a mid-tour visit she told him he wasn't welcome to stay in the apartment that his paycheck was paying for. Marc had raised her daughter from a previous marriage since she was three and she was now 15. Their son was now 10. When I met him, he had been back in the states only since March and his divorce had just become final. He was working a second job just to be able to take care of his son while he had him for the summer.

We started dating over the 4th of July weekend and right away there were "red flags" that I should have paid attention to. The first time I went to their apartment, a Sunday morning two weeks after we started dating, I excused myself to use the bathroom before we left for church. I noticed

there were two dead palmetto bugs (a.k.a. the Florida state bug) in the bathtub. As I was leaving the bathroom, Marc asked if I would mind taking them out of the tub and putting them in the trash for him. I asked why he wouldn't do it, and he said that neither of them liked bugs and wouldn't touch them. I asked how long they had been there, and when he said over a week I asked where they showered.

They didn't. They just went swimming in the apartment complex pool every night. Marc did shower three mornings a week at the base gym after they did PT, but for the most part, they just "bathed" in the pool.

Marc also seemed to always be short on cash, and I soon found myself picking up the tab whenever the three of us went out. I rationalized to myself that he had only recently been divorced and had to start over again with almost nothing. The only piece of furniture that his ex-wife had allowed him to take was the stained mattress that she and her boy-friend had shared while Marc was in Korea. Everything else in his one bedroom apartment was loaned or donated by his parents. Ryan slept on a pull-out sofa in the living room, and their dining room table & chairs were plastic lawn furniture.

Ryan's mother called him almost every day and as soon as she was done interrogating him about me, she would ask to speak to Marc. They would argue endlessly about money and what a bad influence he was setting by dating an "old bitch."

Excuse me? The woman who moves her boyfriend in to play house while her husband is on a solo assignment thinks that *I'm* a bad influence just because I'm older than her???? I wasn't offended by the "bitch" reference. In fact, it was probably the nicest thing she ever called me. B.I.T.C.H. Beautiful. Intelligent. Totally in Control of Herself.

In spite of all the red flags and signs that Marc had more baggage than Imelda Marcos taking her shoes on vacation, I continued to date him. He was a good father to Ryan, and was struggling to set a good example and start his life over. They went to church every week, and Marc was adamant about keeping our relationship celibate while Ryan was with him for the summer. A decision I also agreed was best considering how traumatized Ryan was already by his mother's unconcealed affair. The "bad example" that his ex-wife accused him of setting by just dating me couldn't have been farther from the truth.

I know that Marc's desire to get a puppy for Ryan before he went back to his mother's at the end of the summer was an attempt to get Ryan interested in living with him full time. He hadn't been able to afford to fight for joint custody of Ryan when the divorce was filed, getting only visitation during school breaks. While he was in Korea, Marc had missed him terribly, and when he got back all he could think about was when school let out and he could have him for the summer. Until that time, Marc drove eight hours one way just to spend two nights with his son every other weekend. They talked on the phone every day. I couldn't imagine a more dedicated father.

Marc and Ryan saw the puppy the morning he arrived at the animal shelter, and picked him up that afternoon. He was about six weeks old and they were told he was a lab and pit bull mix. He was adorable. I fell in love instantly, but tried hard to keep my distance since he wasn't going to be my dog but Ryan's.

Marc had not thought about the restrictions of his apartment complex, and when he found out that the pet deposit was as much as a month's rent, he asked if he could keep him at my house during the day until he was able to come up with the deposit. Of course I said yes. Any excuse to see that cute face as often as possible… and I was referring to the puppy—not Marc.

Since we didn't know the exact date, we decided his birthday was June 2nd—about six weeks prior to when he was adopted. To decide on a name for him, we each made a list of names we liked and voted names off our lists until we arrived at the final three. The movie "Starship Trooper" had recently been showing on TV and Ryan and I were big fans. He loved to play games that involved role-playing… secret agents on spy missions to save the world. We would create elaborate plots, fake ID cards with our pictures on them, and imaginary super powers and weapons to battle enemies. I had put "Trooper" on my list of possible names because it sounded strong, and it was chosen in our last round of voting.

Days became nights also when Marc realized that puppies require more attention than he was used to giving anyone other than himself. Oh, did I say that out loud? What I meant to say was that puppies require time and attention to get them housebroken and trained; more time and attention than Marc or Ryan were able (and willing) to give, especially to a puppy so young. I soon found out that Ryan had never had a pet for longer than three or four months… as soon as the cuteness wore off, so did his interest. Marc

had also never had a pet for long other than a family dog when he was growing up, but as I learned more about Marc, I learned more about the family dog.

Tulip, a cocker spaniel, had been his mother's dog. Marc had only a few memories of the dog, and all of them were of her being restricted just to the kitchen area. She was not allowed in the rest of the house, and neither Marc nor his brother spent any real time with her. She was just "a dog" and not a member of the family. I got the impression that most of the time she was an annoyance—some "thing" that wanted love and attention that no one seemed to want to give. When she had died the decision had been made to not get another dog. They were just too much of a bother. How fortunate for all the dogs of the world!

Lucky for Trooper I didn't have the same philosophy when it came to companion animals, and since he was spending so much time at my house, I was raising him with lots of love and attention like I had raised all of my animal companions in the past. Marc and Ryan unfortunately were not as attentive, and whether they liked it or not, he was quickly becoming closely bonded to me. Even though he was supposed to be Ryan's dog, they did not have much interaction with him except to feed or walk him when I reminded them. Neither of which happened often enough for Trooper to bond with them. On the weekends when Marc drove down to see Ryan, I would try to go at least every other month and we would take the dogs so that Trooper could spend time with Ryan.

After Ryan went home for the summer in early August my relationship with Marc shifted into high gear. We spent almost every day—and night—together. We went to church on Sundays, ate lunch together every day since we both worked at the military base, and movies or out to eat once a week. By the middle of September he was already talking about getting married, and we made plans for him to move in with me in October and give up his apartment. While we had remained celibate when Ryan was there, once he was gone Marc and I were intimate three or more times a week.

In late September we made plans one night to go look at rings after work. I got home from work early and when Marc arrived he was on his cell phone arguing with his ex-wife. Within minutes of walking in the door he slammed his phone down on the kitchen counter in anger and said that she had just hung up on him. She had called him at work and they had been arguing for over an hour—she wanted more child support money since he

was going to give up his apartment and would have “extra” money. Before he was able to completely change out of his uniform, she had called back and they started arguing again. They argued the entire twenty minute drive to the mall, and as we sat in the parking lot, they continued arguing. After fifteen minutes of listening to him yell at her, I got out of the car and went into the mall. I went to the bathroom, wandered into three jewelry stores, tried on five rings, and then went back out to the car some thirty minutes later.

He was still arguing with her.

As I got back into the car to drive us home, he made a questioning face and motioned to the mall. I said I was no longer in the mood. They argued the entire twenty minute drive home, and when I pulled into the driveway and went into the house I left him in the car, still arguing.

Thirty minutes later he came into the house. She had hung up on him again. When he came upstairs I could hear his cell phone ringing downstairs and when he turned to go answer it, I held his arm and asked him to please just leave it, but he was worried that if he didn’t answer it, she would think that she was right. Before I had a chance to argue the logic of that, the house phone rang.

I answered it without even thinking that it might be her. She had never been given my home number since Ryan had his own cell phone and so she had access to him no matter where he was. When she introduced herself as Ryan’s mother and asked to speak to Marc I was stunned. I asked how she had gotten my number and she said she had called information. Without saying another word, I handed the phone to Marc and left the room to go downstairs.

I listened to Marc yell at her for another twenty minutes without it sounding like he was ever really saying anything at all.

The “Serenity” my home held for me was quickly being shattered by their arguing. My home had been my refuge after 8 my second marriage and I had spent a lot of time and effort to make it peaceful and welcoming. The yelling and hateful words that were now being spewed in my bedroom were filling the house with negative thoughts. It was my turn to lose some patience.

I walked upstairs and went over to where the phone plugged into the wall and yanked the cord out. Marc turned to me angrily and yelled at me, asking why I did that. “Now she’s really going to think she’s right!!”

I just looked at him and asked “Why did that even matter? Who cares what she thinks?” He knew what the truth was and she obviously wasn’t going to believe him so what did it really matter what she thought? They weren’t even listening to each other any more. All they were doing was making noise. As soon as they started yelling, they stopped listening. Each of them thinking only of what they were going to scream back when one of them stopped to breathe. They had been arguing now for over three hours and nothing had been resolved.

I heard the phone downstairs ring. Neither of us moved for the door. I heard the answering machine pick up and I heard her leave a message angrily asking why Marc was going to allow me to talk to her “that way” and that he better pick up the phone and talk to her away from “that old bitch.” I heard the answering machine time out and hang up on her as she continued to berate him for how I had “treated” her.

I would like to be able to say that was “the” red flag that caused me to end the relationship. I would like to be able to say that I kept the dog and kicked out the man. But I try to live an honest life, and there really wouldn’t be much point in a book if that had been the case. I wanted to believe that the man I saw—the good father, the passionate lover, the quiet, sensitive, funny man I had fallen in love with would be able to break free from her control once the “newness” of their divorce had worn off. She was used to being able to control and manipulate him by verbally, and sometimes physically, abusing him. Once she realized that he was out of her reach, and once he realized that I wasn’t like that, their relationship would be regulated to just civil conversations about Ryan. I had fallen in love with Marc, and with Ryan, and I didn’t want to let her “win” by ending our relationship. That was what she wanted, and I wasn’t going to be that easy to beat.

In the end though, I did choose to end the relationship because of her. My decisions to ignore the red flags I had seen early in the relationship turned into a very expensive mistake, but ultimately, I think I still won.

I got the dog.

As with most of the mistakes we make in life, they are usually lessons we learn from. I’ve been asked if I would change anything in my life—if I had a “do-over”—would there be people or events that I would avoid like the plague. Would I have made different choices? Wiser decisions? That is always a tough one to answer. Would I like to have avoided a painful phase in my life? All the hurt and tears that came with a bad relationship? Sure,

who wouldn’t? But honestly, it is all those things that have made me who I am today, and I actually like myself today. If any of those things hadn’t happened… I’m not sure I would be this person today. I certainly wouldn’t trade all the pain and hurt from that relationship if it meant that I wouldn’t have Trooper.

He is, by far, the best dog I have ever had. And sorry girl friends, but he is, by far, the best friend I have ever had.

Chapter 2

Trooper

From the start, I knew that Trooper was an exceptional dog. I crate-trained him in the beginning, but he was house-broken by the time he was ten weeks old, and he actually never had a bathroom accident in the house. From the time he was housebroken and trusted to be out of the crate when I was not home, he would use the doggy door during the day that my pug, Tink, and my cats used. At night everyone was grounded at "curfew"—sunset. By the time he was twelve weeks old, he was learning to "speak" at the back door at night when he needed to go out. Soon he was too big to fit through the doggy door at all, and would speak to go out when I was home, or hold everything until I got home. He had a single bark for when he needed to go out, but a series of loud "Who are you? This is MY house!" barks when someone rang the doorbell or knocked at the storm door. If he needed to go out at night, he would come to the side of the bed and give his single bark in a softer "inside" voice; but if I was home and wasn't in eyesight during the day, his single bark would be loud enough to hear upstairs even if I was in the shower.

I know I'm making him sound like he was perfect, but he was still just a puppy that was learning how to behave. We had to have the occasional "discussion" about things that were not acceptable to chew on—like corners on the walls. I never yelled at him, never, ever physically disciplined him. Instead, I would get down to eye level with him—which quickly meant just sitting down next to him since he was growing so fast—and we would "discuss" what was unacceptable behavior. I never raised my voice, but would talk low and near his ear. I would point to or touch the offense and tell him that it was unacceptable, and that I knew he was smart and that he knew what acceptable behavior was. I would tell him how proud I was of

all that he had learned so far, and that I knew he was going to learn this as well.

By the time he was five months old he was only chewing on his toys. He had learned to sit, “gimme five,” stay, come, speak, lie down, and whisper—a soft blow of air. He knew the difference between front door and back door, and we were starting to have to spell “walk” and “beach.” When I saw him start to do something that was unacceptable, all I had to do was ask him if he needed to have a discussion about it and he would stop what he was doing and give me those sad puppy eyes of apology. I would praise him and tell him I was proud of him and then off he would go tail and body wiggling with laughter back to his toys. He was losing his lab look and beginning to take on what I thought was a Rhodesian Ridge-back profile.

He was a happy puppy and eager to meet new people. He was curious and watched intently everything that went on in the house. Occasionally when I took him to the doggy day care down the road, he watched me so closely while I drove that I wondered if I would need to start hiding the car keys to keep him from “borrowing” the car at night. He got along great with my cats, Tink, and other dogs in the neighborhood. As soon as he saw squirrels in the yard he would fly through the doggy door to bark and chase them, and when he got too big to fit through the door on his own, he would bark excitedly for me to let him out while the squirrels sat on the fence or in a tree chattering for me to leave him inside as they called him names and teased him. Soon just the word “squirrel” would send him running to the back door to look for one.

When Trooper was about six months old, I got two examples of just how exceptional he was. The first was early in the month when I suffered a retinal tear. After my initial surgeries I had to spend the weekend with my head tilted to the left to keep a gas bubble injected into my eye in the right position as a sort of internal “Band-Aid.” I spent most of the weekend on the sofa. Trooper, except for when he needed to eat or go to the bathroom, refused to leave my side. Literally. He stayed on top of my right side almost the entire weekend, stretched out with his head resting on my shoulder. At that time he weighed almost 50 lbs.

The second thing that happened was when we went to Marc’s parents’ house for Christmas later that month. This was the first time that Trooper had ever seen them. Marc’s grandmother had lost a dog to cancer just two weeks prior and was very depressed. As I brought him into the house, I

pointed her out to him. She was sitting on the couch by herself. I whispered into his ear that she had just lost her dog and was very sad. I told him that I wanted him to be especially nice to her that weekend. He looked up at me, then to her, and when I let him off his lead he walked right over to her and sat down on the floor next to her with his head on her knee. That was where he stayed for the next two hours while she stroked his head and ears.

His intelligence amazed me. His compassion floored me. And that was just the beginning.

Chapter 3

Red Flags

Marc and I were engaged after we had been dating for almost five months. Looking back now I can see all the red flags that I ignored while we were dating because I had been lonely and wanted the "happily ever after" urban myth. I had been married before and it had taken me several years to feel safe enough to open myself to another serious relationship. When I fell in love with Marc and Ryan, I thought that it would be easy to be a step-mother (you may laugh sarcastically here), and imagined that Marc's ex-wife, Marie, and I would become friends—maybe not best friends—but at least united to give Ryan the best of both worlds (you may laugh even louder and longer at this). He spent the school year with her, and just school breaks with Marc. I knew I would never replace her in his life, and really didn't want to, but I hoped that the love and friendship I offered Ryan when I did see him wouldn't be taken as a threat to her status as his mother. I guess I had watched the movie "*Stepmom*" too many times because I couldn't have been more wrong about what our relationship would be like.

After my retinal tear I ignored the red flags out of fear. Fear of what I would do if my vision didn't return. I asked Marc if he was sure he wanted to marry me. I didn't know whether or not full vision would return or how only having partial vision in that eye would impact my ability to work in the future. My current job involved a lot of computer work, taking a paper syllabus and putting it into a software program that would allow for computerized training and testing. If I couldn't see, I couldn't work. I also didn't know if there might come a time when I would need assistance for day-to-day living.

Marc had told me a few weeks prior about spending time with a high school friend who had a degenerative disease and how he felt that he “done his time” for any kind of volunteering to help others by being friends with him (red flag). He wasn’t interested in helping others who were handicapped, or those who were less fortunate (red flag). Because he felt so strongly about that I was concerned that if I lost all my vision that one day I might be sitting home in the dark waiting for him to come home and he would never arrive because he decided to just leave me. I told him he had a get out of jail free card. I wouldn’t question his reasons, even though I had fallen deeply in love with him and Ryan and knew that if he called off the wedding, I would be crushed. But he said he loved me, didn’t want a life without me, and wanted to marry me as soon as possible. He picked the date, I made the plans.

We married a few months later and within a month of the wedding we were in marriage counseling. Something had changed in Marc the day after we got married and I couldn’t figure out what it was. He no longer wanted any physical contact unless I initiated it, which was a complete 180 from what our relationship had been like before we married. I couldn’t understand how a 3 year old man who had wanted to make love for no less than an hour four times a week could suddenly flip a switch and say he was satisfied and happy with having less than five minutes of sex once a month. I certainly wasn’t happy with the sudden decrease in “quality” time and just wanted to understand what had happened. Did I need to wear more, or wear less when we went to bed? I had shopped at Victoria’s Secret buying lingerie and perfumes trying to get him to pay attention to me again. I tried going to bed wearing nothing and tried going to bed wearing men’s flannel pajamas. I showered every night, put on fresh make-up, wore perfume. Nothing I did made him interested in me.

I couldn’t understand how he could be happy with getting hugs or kisses only if I gave him one when before it was him who had wanted hugs every time we left for work or came home at the end of the day. He stopped talking to me about anything other than himself, his son, his ex-wife or his job, and always acted disinterested in anything going on with me. It seemed that most of the discussions we did have involved money—how much I was going to spend on him or his son.

We didn’t fight about it. We disagreed on things, but I’ve been around enough angry men in my life between an alcoholic step-father and an angry

second husband to know that fighting in anger never resolves anything. I tried talking to Marc a few times and every time I asked, he said he was happy and he didn't see anything wrong with the sudden drop in our sex life. I asked if his lack of interest was perhaps the nutritional supplement powder he was taking but he had been taking it before we married, so that wasn't the cause. He still woke up with a morning erection, so he hadn't suddenly become impotent—he just let it "go to waste" instead of giving me a "wake-up call." It was like he had become a pod person. Unemotional. Cold. Unfriendly. I was baffled. When I asked if he would consider marriage counseling, he said yes and went willingly every single week.

Shortly after Ryan arrived for Spring Break that same year, Trooper started to have some behavioral and physical issues. He started throwing up stomach acid two or three times a day. Trips to the veterinarian showed nothing, he was healthy and normal in every other way so I believed that he simply had developed a sensitive stomach. I started him on a healthier diet and began to make sure that he ate three times a day. I would often hand feed him breakfast and dinner, and Marc or Ryan were responsible for making sure he ate lunch. Trooper also suddenly became afraid of the dark, afraid of plastic grocery bags, and sudden noises. Furniture that was out of place would cause him to freeze and bark before running out of the room. I couldn't understand the change in him and would work patiently with him to try to restore his confidence but nothing made any difference.

Collection accounts from Marc's past started to surface that he tried to hide or blame on his ex-wife. In early spring we discussed a major purchase —a Jet Ski that he wanted to get before Ryan came up for the summer. We both agreed to wait until the following year since money was tight. I was paying an extra $300 a month for the collection accounts that he didn't have funds for. When his reenlistment bonus arrived that fall he promised he would repay me for the collection accounts. But in spite of our discussion and agreement, he went behind my back and got the Jet Ski anyway—telling me only when the credit union refused to loan without a co-signer because his credit was so bad. He was forced to call me from the desk of the loan officer with the seller sitting right there, and ask me to come down to sign. I was furious, but I went. I didn't like being pushed into a corner and having to choose between playing "bad cop," or "good wife" and told him so later that evening. I told him he would still be responsible for repaying me for the collection account, but all the expenses for the Jet Ski were his

responsibility only—I would pay for nothing. He later told me that he had wanted the Jet Ski before Ryan came up so that he could rub it in his ex-wife's face.

That year was the hurricane season from hell. Ryan was up for the summer. Marc's ex-wife had turned out to be something from a nightmare. That summer she told us that her mother had died and asked that we not tell Ryan before he came back because she didn't want to spoil his summer. Marc's parents sent money and restaurant gift cards to her, and we also sent a sympathy card. She was given a week's bereavement leave from work and apparently her co-workers "passed the hat" for her as well. We later learned that it was all a lie—she just wanted the paid time off from work. They fired her when they found out.

One weekend when we dropped off Ryan, she said that she was diagnosed with cancer and asked us not to tell Ryan because she didn't want to upset him. She asked if we could take Ryan an additional weekend since she was due to get chemotherapy on her birthday and didn't want him to know she was sick. When we brought him back after the weekend she said she was to get her treatment, she was sporting a new tan, haircut & color, and manicured nails. All she could talk about was the weekend she spent with her newest boyfriend learning how to surf.

I cringed every time the phone rang because the arguments between her and Marc over money and Ryan lasted for hours and left all of us on edge. We never knew what story she would tell to try and get money or sympathy from us. She had "heart attacks," car accidents, and ulcerated eyes from putting contact lens cleaner in her eyes instead of wetting solution. I wear contacts and I while I can understand making that mistake in one eye, how could she have done it in both eyes? The cleaning solution is instantly painful, and once you put it in one eye, you don't usually put it in the other eye.

She would also claim Ryan was ill and constantly take him to doctors. In one school year, he missed 73 days of school because he was "ill," or she overslept, he missed the bus and she refused to drive him to school. He was constantly going to see doctors and coming to see us with all kinds of medications—both prescription and over the counter. When I noticed that some of his prescription medications had not been refilled in six months or more, I stopped letting him take anything that had not been refilled within the last month, and so most of the time when he was with us, he wasn't

taking any medicine. When Ryan was with us the only times he would be sick would be when he threw up from stress after getting off the phone from his mother's interrogations.

My last eye surgery hadn't improved my vision, and it was beginning to look like the loss would be permanent. My father was diagnosed with a terminal illness that had a five year life expectancy—and he had been misdiagnosed for three years.

I was starting to have physical symptoms from the stress of the marriage and everything else. There were days when pain nearly brought me to my knees. Trooper continued to become fearful of everything which only added to my stress. I had never had a dog that was afraid like he had become. I couldn't understand it.

Marc and I continued counseling sessions with no progress. He talked about issues dealing with his ex-wife or son, and would say that he was happy with me, but had no reason or explanation for why he no longer wanted physical contact. He would commit to trying date nights as an exercise to improve things between us, but then as soon as we left the office, he left that commitment behind as well.

I had a good relationship with my in-laws, but Marc and my issues were not ones that I felt needed their input. They were aware that we were getting counseling, but otherwise they weren't interested in what was going on—right or wrong—in our marriage, which was fine with me. They lived eight hours away, and there was little they could do to help other than listen. I didn't feel it was appropriate to address our bedroom issues with his parents, or anyone other than our counselor.

I still refused to face the possibility that I was being used. I have an MBA, for Pete's sake. I'm supposed to be smarter than that.

As the year wound to an end, Trooper continued to throw up two or three times a day, and his fears had increased to almost all men. Men wearing hats or carrying anything resembling a stick (like a fishing pole) would make him bark in fear and try to get away. I had to start taking him for walks on a harness to keep him from slipping out of his collar, but that didn't even work. One afternoon a neighbor wearing gardening gloves and carrying a paper bag of lawn clippings made him so frantic to get away that he pulled out of his harness and ran panicked across the street. I was horrified that it would happen one day and he would get hit by a car. I started walking him with his leash doubled in the harness and collar. He

hated going out after dark and once we were past the reach of street lights, he would freeze in place and refuse to move forward.

I just couldn’t understand why Trooper had changed so much from the happy puppy he had been when he was six months old. His behavior wasn’t something I could explain away, and the difference between him and every other pet I had ever had was like night and day.

Chapter 4

Past Companions…

My first pets that I can remember were when we lived in Germany when I was a child. I can't remember the specific order we got them, but there was a Guinea pig named Greta that I won in a classroom raffle to see who got to take her home for the summer. The following year the school decided that there would be no pets in classrooms and so she was mine to keep. We also had a parakeet named Pete, and the occasional goldfish won at the school carnivals. I don't remember their personalities, but do remember that I spent a lot of time talking to them. I was shy then (really, there once was a time when I would melt into the wall if anyone even spoke to me!) and didn't have many friends. The rare times I was found outside of the school library, I spent with the one friend from our apartment building or with books in my bedroom. When there was another girl with the same first name in my class the teacher wanted me to go by my middle name instead. When I told her what it was, she misunderstood me and called me Meg for almost two months. I was embarrassed and wasn't about to correct her so I started to sign my school work "Meg." It wasn't until my mom brought it to her attention in a parent teacher meeting that the confusion was finally cleared up.

After we returned from Germany, my mother, brother and I lived near family in Arizona while my father was in Vietnam for a year. There I had my first cat—a black and white one that I named "Boots" for two reasons. The first was that she had white feet, but the second was that it was the name of the mascot dog on my favorite TV show at the time —"*Emergency*." I had her for less than a year because my mother insisted I get rid of her before my father returned - she said he didn't like animals.

When he returned we moved once again, this time to Florida. We were there for two years before I challenged my father's affection for animals and came home with a kitten one afternoon. Bandit was a grey and black tabby. About six months later a puppy followed me home from school one day (that's my story and I'm stickin' to it!). Brandy was about six months old and appeared to be a mix between a red long-haired dachshund and a cocker spaniel. She was my first dog and went everywhere with me, even sailing on my dad's boat.

My parents divorced shortly before I turned 15. Mom, my brother, Andrew, and I moved across state to another city along with my new step-father and his teenage daughter. It was a difficult time for all of us as we adjusted to the changes. Bandit and Brandy became my constant companions and confidants in the months… and years that followed. Andrea, my step-sister, got a black cat she named Midnight.

The two years I lived with them after my parents divorce were chaotic with a lot of anger, violence and constant moves as my mother struggled with two or three jobs trying to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table as my step-father drank away most of his income as a salesman. We lived in three different houses during that time and for a while Andrea and I slept on the floor when mom couldn't afford to buy us beds after we moved into an unfurnished house. A church that we didn't even go to finally donated beds for us. Eventually after one too many violent outbursts and getting hit by my step-father, I asked my Dad if I could live with him and moved back for my senior year of high school, dragging along Bandit and Brandy. When Mom found out she was unexpectedly pregnant just before I left, Andrew was sent to live with relatives up north—which my father and I didn't find out about until almost a year later. When we realized where he was, he came to live with us for a year before he decided to join the Army.

My half-sister was born the year I graduated high school, and three years later, Andrea went to live with her mother in Pennsylvania. Midnight went with her. He was an old man by then. One night my step-father had gone outside to dump some hot cooking oil in the grass and tripped over Midnight. Hot oil was spilled all over one side of him and he took off screaming for the nearby woods. When he didn't return the next day, or for weeks after, Andrea thought he had died of his burns. Amazingly, almost a year later and not long before her move to Pennsylvania, Midnight appeared on the door-step. Thin, hungry, and obviously aged by the experience he

was still alive. He was deeply scarred with patches of fur missing that never grew back. But his love for Andrea was apparent as soon as he saw her. He never left her side after that and she told me years later that he had finally died in his sleep one night. He was a good cat and his love and devotion to her were unconditional. I like to believe that it was that love for her that kept him from dying in the woods when he was burned so badly.

Bandit and Brandy were joined by another tabby kitten I named Snookums. Dad, who just barely tolerated the cats and dog as it was, always came up with new names for them. Brandy became “Mutt” and Bandit was simply “That Cat” since she avoided him as much as possible. His girlfriend had a tuxedo cat named Socks, but when Dad started calling him “Stinky” Socks it wasn’t long before he would only answer to Stinky. Snookums, who seemed to suffer from an eating disorder and gained quite a bit of weight, he started to call “Oink.” Before long, she only answered to Oink which was very embarrassing when I called her in at night… “Here Oink, here kitty, kitty, here Oink!” Fortunately with my cats now, I just have to shake their kitty treat can to get them to come running!

Two years later when moving into an apartment, I needed to find a home for Snookums since the apartment would only allow me to have two pets. A friend of mine from work offered to take her, and one Saturday I drove her over to the house. Most cats aren’t huge fans of going for a ride in the car. It usually meant a trip to the vet which was never much fun. Snookums was no different. She hated being in the car and yowled and complained for the entire ride. When I took her onto the enclosed porch of her new home, I set her down to explore while I talked to my friend. Snookums apparently decided she didn’t like the new home and she didn’t want to relocate. She managed to pull open the screen door and went back to the hated car and climbed in an open window. Looking back, I wish I had listened to her and respected her request, but I was too consumed with the grief of having to give her up to stop and think about it. I got her back out of the car and took her again to the porch. My friend held the screen door closed while I drove away so she couldn’t escape again. When I asked her the following Monday how Snookums was adjusting, she said that she had run away again the same day and never returned. She hadn’t called to tell me because she didn’t want me to worry and assumed that the cat would come back. I was devastated. Because I was ignorant of the possibilities of communication with animals, I had ignored her behavior which should have

told me that she didn't want to stay there. For months I drove the streets of her neighborhood after work and several times on weekends, driving slowly with my window open and calling "Here Oink, here kitty, kitty, here Oink." I never saw her again.

The following year I moved to California with my fiancée. Bandit was now ten years old, and Brandy nine. The long flight from Florida to California seemed to have had a negative affect on Brandy and she began to have behavior issues—hiding under the bed whenever I wasn't home and snapping at anyone who tried to get her to come out. She was using the bathroom in the house, and her eyes had quickly clouded over with cataracts. She was miserable most of the time, only wagging her tail when she heard my voice. I had to have her put to sleep just three months after we arrived. I was heartbroken. My mother, step-father and sister had moved to Scotland the previous summer and when mom's father—my grandfather—died just before Thanksgiving I had to call and give her the news. Still reeling from that loss and the realization that my move to California was not a good decision, when I had to have Brandy put down I felt like I had lost my only friend. I was overwhelmed with grief for months.

That marriage was short lived. He had an affinity for a white powered substance that I did not share. I had tried to call the wedding off but my Dad and his new wife made it clear that I was not welcome in what was now "her" home, and so without a job, family or friends in California, I married him believing (naïvely) that he would change. After a year of living in a shared home with four of his friends (all single males) I was tired of the secretive "male bonding" trips out of town, the constant parties, alcohol, and his use of the white powder. I spent my first Thanksgiving in California without him, cooking a turkey for one of his friends, practically a stranger to me, while "the guys" went on a "no girls allowed" ski trip to Mammoth. After our divorce one of his friends told me that they weren't necessarily "no girls allowed" trips—just not me or any of their girlfriends since there were "other" women they would hope to meet on the trips. I was expected to be a cook and clean-up crew for their frequent parties—parties that would start Friday after work and often not end until Sunday evening. Saturday mornings I was expected to fix breakfast for whoever had slept on sofas, floors, or patio furniture. Clean the house and prepare food for the next round. Friday and Saturday nights I would mingle and socialize until midnight, then lock myself in our bedroom watching old black and white

horror movies until I fell asleep. My husband never knocked to come in. In the beginning I sometimes went looking for him as I was making my way to the bedroom, but the night I found him naked in the Jacuzzi with several other (also naked) people I didn't know, I stopped. I wasn't a prude, but the drug seemed to give him a side of his personality that I didn't know, and didn't want to know. I filed for a divorce on our first anniversary. I was 25. Not surprisingly the first week I spent in my new apartment, he wanted to know if I would still do his laundry for him. I'll let you guess what I said since I'd like this to still be an PG-13 rated book and don't want to push the literary censor's buttons but I think it is safe to say that I didn't go into the laundry washing business.

When I moved into my apartment, I still had Bandit, but now also another kitten—Jazzmin. She was a very sweet cat and both she and Bandit got along well. Unfortunately, Bandit's health started to decline and less than four months after my divorce, I had to have her put to sleep. When I started dating again, Jazz didn't really care for my boyfriend, Will, very much. Obviously she was better at sensing a person's character than I was. I should have taken lessons from her. She would act as if she was finally going to accept him and would walk over as if to rub against his leg, and when he would reach down to pet her, she would flick her tail at him and move just out of reach. We married just over a year later and when we moved into our new home the following spring, he insisted I get rid of her because she had still not accepted him. Hating myself for doing it, I obliged, crying all the way to the animal shelter and looking in the rear view mirror the entire time, hoping and praying he would chase after me to tell me I could keep her.

Looking back now I can see that was the defining moment when I submitted to his control and the manipulation that would keep me bound by fear to him for the duration of our marriage. I had already experienced his temper enough to know that if I refused his demands to get rid of Jazzmin it would not have been an easy life for us, and he most likely would have taken matters into his own hands to get rid of her. Shortly after she was gone, he brought home a little grey kitten he named Angel. Whether or not it was meant as an apology for his dislike of Jazzmin, I don't know. But I took it as such and life went on.

Angel was joined by Shotzy, an adult German Shepherd that became our "guard" dog. I'm not sure that he would ever have attacked anyone, but

he sounded fierce when he barked and certainly would have made anyone think twice before trying to break into the house. Several years later when we went camping for a long weekend, we set the TV and several lights on timers so that it would look as if someone was home. Shotzy was restricted to the yard—which was fenced in to completely surround the house, but he had access to a covered side patio where his water and food were just outside the kitchen door. We left him plenty of water and food since he tended to be a grazer and not a gulper when he ate. The kitchen door had a small cat door installed so that Angel could come and go as she wanted, and her food and water were left in the kitchen. We had left them before on previous camping trips for the same amount of time, and never had any problems.

This trip, however, didn't go as smoothly. When we returned after three nights away, we could hear Shotzy barking like crazy from inside the house as we unlocked the front door. Expecting the worst—broken windows and a burglarized house—Will rushed to get inside.

Shotzy had apparently decided that he needed to be in the house while we were gone this time and managed to squeeze through the tiny cat door in the kitchen. Once inside he realized that he couldn't get back out so set about to get comfortable. Judging by the mess he left, it appeared he had been in the house for at least two nights. He had eaten all of the cat food, drank both toilets dry, and dragged the trash can into the living room where he scattered everything in his search for more food. Fortunately, he restricted his bathroom breaks to the breakfast nook where the floor was easier cleaned and sanitized than if he had used the living room carpet. The sofa was covered with his fur, so we assumed he had slept there, enjoying the TV when it came on periodically. While we were fishing in the mountains, he was kicking back at home, living the good life.

A year later we got our first pug from friends of ours. Chynna was black, with a little white star on her chest, and when she lay back on my legs during the drive home after we picked her up, she looked like a little fruit bat with her ears out flat. I remember thinking, "Oh my gosh, what an ugly little dog. What were we thinking?" That thought was short lived though, and before she was ten weeks old she had won my heart. She was tiny enough to wear a little pink Cabbage Patch doll sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up, and when she slept (the only time she was still for any length of time) I would paint her little black toenails a hot pink. When she

woke she was a non-stop blur of motion with flashes of pink as she ran around, getting into everyone's business and letting Shotzy know that she ruled the house. She would grab onto his tail with her mouth and he would stand up and walk away, her front paws off the ground, dancing on her toes trying to make him stop and lay down again. She would growl and bark at him, grabbing his lower lip or neck in her "attacks" and he would just stand there and tolerate it, sometimes "face-fighting" with her. With his mouth open he would make noise and act as if he was going to bite her, but never once actually biting her. We would often find them sleeping together, Shotzy stretched out on his side with Chynna stretched out on top of him as if he were a big soft pillow.

When she was a year and a half old we bred Chynna, wanting her to have one litter before we had her spayed. We were hoping for a fawn female to keep. The pregnancy went well, and the puppies were born on July 5, a Sunday that year. It was the only Sunday Will had ever worked, both before and after that day—which considering his aversion to the sight of blood, was probably a good thing. I'd never been pregnant or even had a dog or cat that had been so was naïve about what would happen—or what could go wrong.

Chynna had been reluctant to get off the water bed that morning, and needing to wash the sheets I picked her up and put her on the floor. As I walked down the hall in front of her, my arms loaded with the sheets, I was talking to her about how much I would have liked to have slept late as well, but there was just too much to do before Will got home from work. As I turned to see if she was following me, I saw her starting to squat in the hall as if to go to the bathroom and knew instantly that she was in labor. I dropped the sheets and hurried to pick her up and carried her to the box we had prepared in the enclosed patio. As soon as I set her down, she delivered her first puppy, and then ran panicked to hide in the bottom of the cat condo. Fortunately, the puppy broke free from the placental sac when it was born. I grabbed the portable phone and called the emergency vet in a panic. Chynna didn't want anything to do with the puppy, and I didn't know what to do. As they walked me through tying off the umbilical cord with a piece of dental floss and cutting it with scissors sterilized with rubbing alcohol, Chynna continued to hide. I know she was worried about what she probably thought was a very painful bathroom accident in the house. I gently rubbed the puppy dry with a clean towel and set it on a heating pad, covered with

another towel and set to low. It was a little girl, black in color just like Chynna. I then cleaned up the dirty towels and finally coaxed Chynna out of the condo. We didn't know how many puppies she was pregnant with, and since it had been almost an hour since the birth, I didn't think she had any more. I gave her lots of praise and hugs while I introduced her to the puppy. Then she started squatting again and tried to deliver another puppy, but this time, the puppy appeared to be stuck. I could see the chubby little face, but it wasn't going anywhere. Gently I pushed Chynna's skin back from his cheeks so I could gently pull on his face and he suddenly popped out. He was much bigger than the first little girl, and also a black one. Chynna again hid in the cat condo while I cleaned the new puppy and cut his cord. Once the new puppy was cleaned and resting with the other, they both started crying and Chynna came over to see them. Her curiosity got the best of her and she began to lick them clean. Over the next four hours she delivered four more puppies, almost one an hour. The third puppy was a fawn boy, almost as big as the first boy, then a black girl, another smaller black boy, and then finally—our little fawn girl that we named Crystal. When she was born, her sac didn't break open when she dropped, and as she frantically scratched from inside the sac, I was frantically trying to tear it open. Finally I was able to snip it open and she was safe. After almost six hours Chynna had six puppies in all, three girls, three boys, four blacks and two fawns. All of them were healthy. By the time the last one was born, Chynna was eagerly cleaning and nursing them.

Over the next eight weeks, the puppies grew quickly and homes were found for all of them except of course our little fawn girl, Crystal. She quickly assumed the role of Queen of the House from her mother, and Shotzy again became a surrogate father, play toy, pillow for her. Angel also did her part—one day when the puppies were about seven weeks old I heard them fighting loudly in the back bedroom where their improvised puppy pen had been set up. As I walked back to the room, I could see Angel sitting on the bed watching them with interest. Looking into the pen, I could see all six puppies pulling a tug-of-war on a bird that Angel had brought in for them. Apparently she didn't think we were feeding them enough!

Chynna and Crystal went everywhere they could with us. Camping and fishing trips every month during the summer. One year we camped at a different site, and after the first hike up the mountain to see the views both dogs developed horrible limps, holding one of their front paws up in the air.

I looked at their pads, between their toes, but couldn't find any reason for the pain. The rest of the trip they were carried as far as a clearing to go to the bathroom and then spent the rest of the trip resting on pillows. Any attempt to make them walk past the clearing would result in a great deal of pain and limping. I decided that as soon as we got home I was going to have to take them to the vet. When we arrived back home I opened the truck door and climbed out, preparing to pick up and carry the pugs to the house. Amazingly, both dogs jumped out of the truck and ran happily to the house, their excitement to be home unable to be contained. The little brats had been faking it all along, just to avoid going back up the hill and enjoying all the extra pampering and spoiling they got as a result!

The following year I lost my job as the California economy took a dive and employers were forced to lay off employees in order to stay alive. After going through our savings trying to keep the house, we lost it to foreclosure and moved into a 5th wheel trailer parked on the property of a friend.

Taking three dogs and a cat was not an option, and so the decision was made to find homes for Shotzy and Angel since the pugs would "fit" easier into the 5th wheel, and with coyotes in the area, Angel would not have been able to be an outside cat. Unknown to me, Will had made the decision before actually discussing it with me and had put an ad in one of the local papers. Within the next week I came home twice to find that one of them had gone. Each time I was very upset that I had not been given the opportunity to meet the new owners or say my good-byes to them.

I can see now how Will's complete disregard for my feelings for Shotzy and Angel were just another sign of his disregard for my feelings at all. I had lost my independence and my individuality as well. I wasn't allowed to have an opinion unless it was his opinion. I wasn't allowed to listen to my choice of music, or watch TV shows I wanted. I couldn't have friends unless they were his friends. If he had a hobby or interest that he was passionate about, I was expected to be just as passionate about it as he was, and could not have any hobby or interests that did not include him or that he wasn't equally passionate about. When we voted—always by absentee ballot—our cards were punched together so that our votes were the same, regardless of whether or not I agreed with his choices. Discussing any difference of opinion on politics, religion, or any other issue was always a good way to start a fight where no matter what the issue was I was always going to be wrong. I simply wasn't allowed to have any difference of

opinion so there was no need to discuss anything. His word was rule, regardless of whether it was based on solid knowledge or a prejudice based on ignorance and insecurity.

It's funny now how his determination to control me, even from the grave, ultimately lead me to my freedom. I was getting my Bachelor's degree so that I could get work as a teacher, one of the few areas that were in desperate need of people and not laying off like all the other businesses in California. When I started work for a company in a temporary slot that eventually became permanent, my boss—a very wise woman who saw more in me than I saw myself then—encouraged me to pursue my Master's degree in Business Administration as soon as I graduated with my Bachelor's. Reluctant to jump from the frying pan into the fire again with school work, I resisted. But when Will thought that by having an MBA I would not "need" to be with another man whenever he died, the decision was made for me. With an MBA I would be able to support myself and live the rest of my life alone, mourning his death and my loss since I obviously would never actually *want* to be with another man again.

Yeah, right. Uh-huh. Sure.

Our marriage wasn't always bad or abusive; it was really more like a wild roller coaster ride. It was those infrequent good times that kept me from leaving for many years, always hoping that they would become more frequent and last longer. I kept thinking those thoughts that I now know were just a sign of how dysfunctional I really was. "If only I was prettier; smarter; skinnier… he wouldn't act that way." "If only I cleaned or cooked better he wouldn't act that way." But the truth of it was that even if I had filled his image of the "perfect" woman and wife, he still would have found something wrong with me. That was how he controlled and manipulated me. I was never going to be "good enough" but was always going to be trapped in that vicious circle of trying to be.

When we were at the top of the roller coaster, we would often travel together on fishing trips in the Sierra Nevada Mountains; visiting family in Utah, Oklahoma, Florida, and once to Scotland. He was self-employed so any time I had a business trip somewhere, he was able to go along and we would turn it into a mini-vacation. We had a camper, and later a small boat to take out on the lakes when we camped. We also had a Harley and would go on long road trips with friends.

When things were bad, however, in addition of staying because I was afraid of what he would do to me if I tried to leave, I often stayed because I was worried about how he would treat the dogs or cats when I left. I would plan elaborate escapes that would involve faking a car-jacking on the freeway when I was out with the dogs, leaving a little blood from one of them on the car seat to hopefully keep him from looking too far for us or in the right direction.

Fortunately, I never got that desperate. During the years we were married, while he often threw things at me, yelled at or threatened me, belittled me, isolated and controlled me, there really was just one time when he actually hit me, but once was enough for me to live in fear of it happening again. He had gotten angry with me when I wanted to donate some old work clothes that I no longer wore and would never wear again to charity group. I had taken them out to the front of the house where he was raking leaves so that I could put them in my car. When he asked what I was planning on doing with them, I told him and turned to go back into the house to get more. As soon as I turned my back, he hit me across both legs with the handle of the rake, leaving welts that lasted for days. He offered no explanation or apology, the clothes went back into my closet, and he didn't really talk to me for weeks after the incident. Silence was his favorite way to "punish" me for anything, whether it was something I had done or not done, said or not said, or completely unrelated to me. Under normal circumstances I might have said his silence was golden, but it was always cold and terrifying. I often never knew what triggered his silence and asking him what was wrong only made it worse and last longer. In anger he would tell me to leave him alone and let him work through it himself. When the next time he stopped talking to me and I gave him his space, he would get angry because I had left him alone. I was damned if I did, and damned if I didn't.

Once when we were watching the movie "Con Air" he told me to remember a certain scene in the movie where the convicts were discussing how they wound up in prison. In that scene, one of the characters tells how he killed the family of his cheating girlfriend—not the girlfriend, but everyone she cared about. It was that scene Will told me to remember. When I asked if that was a threat, he simply said that I just needed to remember it. Later when we watched "Sleeping with the Enemy" I was so

uncomfortable I couldn't look at him at all during the movie. It was too close to home.

Growing up I always wanted a house full of children. I gave up that dream when he told me that if we ever had children and I wanted to leave him, he would kill me before he would give up or share custody. What an effective form of birth control that was!

When I finally left him, I slept with a loaded gun under my pillow for almost a year, even after I left the state and moved hundreds of miles away. I had nightmares for months that he would come for me.

I often wrote poetry during those years we were married, hiding it away where he wouldn't find it, but needing some outlet for my feelings and fears. Recently I found one of my old notebooks and poems that reminded me of how far that "bottom" was before I hit it.

* * *

Thoughts of death came my way
Once again yesterday.
How much easier your life would be
If only it weren't for me.
I prayed to be released from God's plan.
But no answer; there is so much I don't understand.
I fight those thoughts with hopes and dreams,
Decorating schemes, favorite things.
But once in a while it creeps back into my day.
How much easier your life would be,
If only it weren't for me. (~1997)

* * *

My pen becomes a window to my soul.
Throwing back the shutters that confine me.
The words that escape express what my voice cannot. Hope.
Fear.
Love.
Anger.
They beat against the shutters, hoping to escape forever.
My pen becomes a window to my soul. (~1995)

* * *

Inside, I am a strong, self-assured woman.
Outside, I am a passive, insecure girl.
I wish I could turn myself inside out. (~1995)

* * *

I pray for death, it does not come.
Perhaps I still have deeds undone.
I wish I knew just what they were;
For then life's purpose would be known for sure.
I feel so lost and alone at times,
All I can do is make up rhymes. (~1995)

* * *

Chynna died on Mother's Day the year that I finally got the courage to leave him, two weeks after she had a small stroke. I was out of town on a business trip in Texas. Will had also been working out of town in Palm Springs. My father-in-law and grandfather-in-law had been living with us for two years by then, and when Dad called Will and told him how quickly Chynna had gone downhill after we both left, he immediately turned around and went home. I didn't have that option, and so when he called to tell me that she had died in his arms as he walked in the door of the vet's office I was inconsolable. I was half way across the country and couldn't leave my class for another week. She had waited for one of us to come home, and it broke my heart that it wasn't me who had been there for her.

When I left Will a month later, I also had to leave Crystal behind and it almost destroyed me. Seeing her little face looking at me through the fence as I drove away, knowing that she was grieving for Chynna as much as I was, and then not understanding where her "other mom" was going without her. But my apartment would only allow me to bring the cats, no dogs at all. It was years before I was able to forgive myself for leaving her. She died four and a half years after I left when she was twelve. Apparently she had put on so much weight that one of her bronchial tubes tore, and she suffered for about two weeks struggling to breathe before they took her to the vet

and had her put down. I didn’t find out until a year later and it broke my heart all over again that I hadn’t been there for her when she needed me.

Chapter 5

The Current Clan

All of the pets I had ever had in the past had been happy and well adjusted, never fearful like Trooper had become. Even the cats were friendly and outgoing—contrary to most people's perceptions of cats being aloof and independent. That made Trooper's sudden personality change even more baffling.

Cali (a calico, and also short for California) and her brother, Mandy (short for Mandarin Orange) had come with me when I divorced and moved back to Florida. I had picked them both from a litter of kittens the week after they were born, and so had known both of them since before their eyes even opened. She had always been a bit of a reclusive cat—taking her time to meet and greet when new people came into the house, but both she and Mandy had adored Tink from the moment they met her—something that surprised Tink. I can still remember the "deer in the headlights" look Tink had on her face when both cats—cats she had never seen or met before—rubbed up against her and started giving her kisses. I like to believe that it was because Tink reminded them of Crystal and they saw in her a kindred spirit. In spite of her being elusive when there were a lot of people in the house, Cali was a sweet, affectionate, and gentle cat. She stayed mostly in my bedroom and on the upstairs deck in her favorite place to sun, but would always come to greet me when I got home from work. She loved to sleep with me or snuggle on my lap when we watched TV. Often when I was stretched out in the recliner, I would have Tink on one side of me, Mandy on the other side with his head on Tink's stomach, Cali on the back headrest. Later we would add Ebony on the extended foot rest. It was quite the balancing act to keep us from tipping when Ebony would jump onto the foot rest, or when I needed to get up. When Oreo joined us, he traded places

with Cali, and she and Mandy both would curl up on my lap with Tink. They were all like a blanket of love. Unfortunately, her elusive personality hid an illness from me until it was too late. When I started dating Marc, she had started to hide more often. Perhaps she was as intuitive as Jazzmin had been about a person's character. I would see her eating occasionally, or out on the deck, and would feel her walking across the bed at night, but seldom saw her downstairs anymore. One day I saw her sunning on the deck and went to pick her up and give her a hug. She had always been a small cat, but when I picked her up that morning she was practically skin and bones. I took her immediately to the vet's office. She had lost almost all of her body weight and muscle tone. There was nothing obviously apparent, but he said that her breath smelled like her kidneys were failing. He could do a lot of tests that would be very painful on her gaunt body to determine what was wrong, but for a five year old cat to be that emaciated, there most likely was not going to be a cure for her. I gave her kisses, said my goodbyes, and let him end her pain and suffering. Looking back, I think that she knew she was dying and chose that day to stay out where I would be sure to see her so that I could ease the pain for her.

Mandy, was—and is—healthy and happy. He is an orange striped, stumpy tail Manx, just like his mother, and just like a half sister a few litters before him. Mandy is the most laid back cat I've ever had. If I were to give him a human "personality" I would have to say he would be a California surfer dude. When I am bent over a cabinet or gardening project too long, he will jump onto my back and then lie down like he is on a surfboard. His front paws will wrap around my waist like he is giving me an upside down hug… or getting ready to paddle in on a wave. He is the most talkative of the three cats and whenever I return from a trip away, he will talk non-stop until he is almost hoarse. I'm not sure if I'm catching hell for being gone, or if he is filling me in on all the trouble the other cats got into! He loves to be cradled like a baby, rolling his head back to look at the world upside down. I can just imagine him with a Jeff Spicoli grin saying "All I need are some tasty waves, a cool buzz, and I'm fine." (O.k.—I'm dating myself with a quote from "Fast Times at Ridgemont High!")

Ebony, my long-hair black cat, was tossed from a car when she was five weeks old and came to me by way of the office secretary where I worked. She is the most social and demanding of my cats. Trying to close her in another room when I have parties proves to be a waste of time because she

rabbit-kicks the door so hard she can pop the latch and join in the fun. She will mingle among the guests, demanding adoration and praise from everyone and when she doesn't get enough satisfactory attention, she will not hesitate to head-butt the offending person or nip their fingers until they continue petting her. Fear is not a word in her vocabulary. One afternoon I was talking to neighbors who were with their bulldog, Pelé. He was about six months old and already almost 20 lbs heavier than Ebony. Apparently, Pelé was standing too close to me because Ebony charged out of the garage to protect me and chased a screaming Pelé down the driveway. It was months before Pelé would walk near my townhouse without cautiously looking for that crazy black torpedo! We still laugh about it!

Oreo was found in a parking lot when he was just a few days old. He still had a little bit of umbilical cord on him. The girl who found him didn't have any idea what to do with him, and so he came to me. His name came from the coloring on his head. Black on his eyes and ears with a white stripe 5 down from his forehead to his nose and a white mouth—a typical Tuxedo cat. I would take him to work stuffed into a sock to keep him warm, then put him on a heating pad in a desk drawer so I could feed him every few hours. I slept at night with him held against me—spooning—and he still occasionally loves to sleep with me that way. I'm sure his mother was feral since he still has a bit of a wild streak in him. That boy can cuss worse than anything I've ever heard when he has to do something he doesn't want to—like getting his claws trimmed. He loves to "help" make the bed by tunneling under the blanket and then making vicious wild cat growls and hisses when I try to move the blanket around him. He really is frightening sounding and if you didn't know that he was really a mama's boy, you'd think he was rabid and going to rip your eyes out. Oreo is the hunter of all three cats—finding squirrels, birds, snakes and lizards in the house is not uncommon during the summer months—and not always dead either!

I have to throw Ripkin in here at this point even though he isn't really my dog, but my neighbor, John's. Ripkin was a rescue dog; John got him in Texas as a 40+ pound, approximately two years old adult dog, so his history is unknown. He is a yellow lab mix, and somewhere in his DNA is a little Chow that shows as black spots on his tongue. As soon as Trooper and Ripkin met, they were best buds. Ripkin can stand completely under Trooper, and Tink could (and often would) stand under Ripkin, so they looked like one of those stackable children's puzzles. Since John is active

duty military, Ripkin often camps at my house when he is on temporary duty away from home. He now also comes over during the day occasionally for our own “doggy day care” at my house. As a result, Ripkin has learned to tolerate and appreciate my cats—all of whom accepted him with their usual attitude of “Oh great. Another dog. Whatever.” He did make a few attempts to chase one of them up the stairs before he got the sharp end of Ebony’s paw when he tried to chase her. Ripkin has one of those happy, go-lucky personalities. No one is a stranger to him, and he loves to meet, greet and frisk you for treats. Whatever his history was, at some point we think he must have been starved for food. He will quickly inhale any food, treat, or potentially edible substance before he even knows what it was. Most of the time without even chewing, and will always look for more as if he has an insatiable hunger. Both Ripkin and Trooper recognize each other’s names and know where the other lives—if Trooper and I are returning from a walk and he is off leash, I can ask him if he wants to see Ripkin and he will make a beeline for his front door. Ripkin will do the same. They are, for the most part, inseparable pals who are always excited to see each other and spend time playing or just lying on the floor napping. I can tell, however, after a week into one of Ripkin’s extended stays that their relationship is almost like a big brother (Trooper) with an annoying little brother (Ripkin) in spite of the fact that Trooper is the younger of the two. Ripkin can have a pushy “me first” attitude about everything from eating to getting out the door first for a walk, or getting upstairs to bed or to who gets to ride shotgun on the way to day care. On a recent two week stay, when I did our usual “last one upstairs is a rotten egg” call before going up for bed, Ripkin made a good attempt at getting up first, but Trooper body slammed him into the wall at the bottom of the stairs and beat him. Yep, typical “siblings.”

My pug, Tink, was also a rescue and I got her when she was nine months old. Officially, she was “Tinkerbell,” however “Tink” seemed to fit her personality better and so it stuck. One Halloween she and Trooper dressed up as Tinkerbell and Peter Pan, but that was the only time she ever wore a costume or shirt other than a bandana after a grooming trip. Her extra “padding” made her overheat quickly and so keeping her in a shirt or costume for too long could be dangerous. Trooper on the other hand, loves to wear shirts. When Trooper arrived, Tink was three years old and had already had two major surgeries to remove bladder stones. She was

diagnosed with liver shunts after her second surgery, and her health issues just seemed to grow each year. In spite of it all, Tink never seemed to be afraid of anything or anyone. She was a happy, carefree spirit who greeted everyone with a tail wag and a face full of pug snot if they got too close. We joked in my townhouse complex that she was the “official” greeter—she would wander into anyone’s open front door, or hop in their car for a ride if they left the door open. Everyone loved her, and she loved everyone. At the dog park when she felt that the dogs were being too rough with someone—even a dog ten times her size—she would 59 wade right in like a referee to break it up. Chasing the big dogs at the park was her favorite thing to do… barking like a squeaky toy as she ran. Someone once asked me if she was hurting because of how she barked when she ran, and I told them no, that was her happy bark. She was having the time of her life playing with the big dogs. She took care of everything with a big slobbery pug kiss. The only thing her kisses—or mine - couldn’t fix was her own health problems.

Chapter 6

Final Straws

My health issues caused me to need another surgery in early spring shortly after our first anniversary. Once again, Trooper refused to leave my side as soon as I was home from the hospital. It was also when I finally realized just where I stood in my marriage and began to accept that it could not be salvaged.

The morning after I got out of the hospital I awoke briefly to the delicious smell of French toast and sausage cooking. I remember thinking, “Wow. What a sweet thing for Marc to do,” before I fell back asleep in a comfortable drug induced fog. When I woke an hour later, he asked me whether or not I was ready for breakfast and I said that I was. But what he brought upstairs for me wasn’t French toast and sausage. It was cold cereal and coffee. Thinking maybe I had just imagined the smells earlier I asked him whether or not I had dreamed the French toast and sausage. “No,” he said, “I made them for myself.” I was too surprised to even respond as he turned and left the room.

Ryan arrived in early May for his summer visit, and tensions were high in the house. Marc had started to blatantly lie to me about money and issues with Ryan, and I suspected he was sending his ex-wife more money than just his child support payments. I learned he was borrowing money from his parents, and he never seemed to have any funds for when we would all go to dinner. Whenever we went shopping he would wander off when it was time to pay, and every month it was one excuse after another about why he didn’t have money for any of the utilities bills we had agreed to share.

Marie called several times a day to either talk to Ryan or yell at Marc. I found out that she had been unhappy Ryan had fun with me when he had visited during spring break. We had played imaginary spy missions and

spent time working on craft project gifts for his mom and half-sister. Unfortunately as a result she felt threatened and had told him he couldn't love her and like me at the same time, so he had to choose between us. Not wanting to choose, Ryan unhappily avoided me every chance he could, leaving the room when I came in and hiding out in his bedroom for almost the entire month of May. It was easier for him to do that than risk having fun and letting something slip to his mother. I loved Ryan, but knew that I had to be careful in what I said or did since he was so emotionally fragile at times because of his mother's abuse and ultimatums. He was being used as a weapon against his father, a bargaining chip, and held "hostage" at times to get her demands met. Marc would use him as a weapon against his mother by spoiling him with gifts and trips that she could not provide. Even his paternal grandparents gave in to him and gave him anything he wanted. The first Christmas I spent with Marc and his family, his parents gave him almost $1,000 in gifts, including $150 cash. What eleven-year old boy needs $150 cash? He managed to lose almost half of it before we even got him back to his mother's house after the holiday. The rest she stole from his wallet.

Marc had started being secretive as well. Whenever his cell phone would ring, he would look at the caller ID then take the call outside. Our home office had been set up originally with matching desks side by side on the same wall with our computer screens visible to each other. Now he wanted the office arranged so that our desks faced and his screen could not be seen unless I walked around behind him. There were times when I would walk into the office to pay bills and he would immediately shut down his computer and leave the room.

I decided to tell Marc I wanted to separate as soon as summer was over and Ryan went back to his mother's house. It was apparent after more than a year in counseling that there was no love or affection for me on his part, and the agony I felt for Ryan's situation was frustrating. My hands were tied and I was unable to convince his mother that I wasn't a threat to her status as the sun Ryan's world revolved around. Marc wasn't paying me back for the funds I put out to pay off his collection accounts as he promised—his reenlistment bonus had gone quickly into a stereo and speakers for his car, and then mysteriously was gone. It was becoming more and more difficult for me to keep up with the bills to support the three of us. I was working two jobs just to try to keep the household afloat.

I wanted us to go back to square one and start “dating” again and work on our relationship. I imagined a small ceremony to renew our vows when we had pulled it all back together again—not the elaborate wedding I had paid for that Marc had insisted upon but just a small ceremony with us reconfirming our commitment to each other. I still believed that we could work things out because I really did not want to divorce again.

I know.

“Love” is blind.

Trooper continued to throw up and become even more fearful of things. I was taking him to day care now at least twice a week because it seemed to help him. He didn’t throw up while he was there, didn’t seem afraid of the men there, and came home so exhausted he usually fell right to sleep for the rest of the evening. When he didn’t go to day care, he spent most of his days sleeping unless I was home on the weekend and then I would often take him to the bay near our house to go swimming, or take him to the dog park to run.

Ryan spent most week days at the youth program on base, and when he wasn’t there because Marc couldn’t afford the full summer he wouldn’t walk or play with Trooper during the day. The most he would do was to open the back door for him to go outside to use the bathroom. Ryan’s days were spent playing video games or watching TV even if he had been told not to and was given chores to do. He would call us frequently during the day to try and figure out when we were going to be home so that he could try to get his chores done in the 15–20 minutes it would take for us to get home from the base.

We often played board games to determine who would do which chores for the coming week. Winner got to pick which chore the loser had to do for a week. One week Ryan was to hand wash all the dishes. Part of it was discipline—he had not done his chores the previous week, so Marc decided that the dishwasher was off limits for the week. When we realized early in the week that Ryan’s idea of washing the dishes didn’t include soap or hot water, he got the chore for two weeks. While he was now using soap and hot water, he wasn’t carefully cleaning all the food off the dishes or silverware, and would put them away with food still dried to them.

He was a good kid, smart, but lazy—a trait that his parents and grandparents had helped to develop since they never held him accountable for doing a good job and would always pay him his allowance whatever he

did, regardless of whether or not it was done correctly. As a result, Ryan realized he didn't have to try, didn't have to work, and really didn't have to take pride in anything he did in order to get his allowance. He told me once that his dream job was something that would pay him millions of dollars but not require him to do anything. When I realized that he wasn't really washing the dishes but just swishing them in the water, I bought very inexpensive paper plates and plastic forks and knives to use for a week, putting away all the silverware.

While that sounds like I was also "enabling" him to be lazy, that week I cooked steaks, chicken, pork chops and other foods that were eaten easier with silverware rather than plastic. They complained because the forks and knives kept breaking. The paper plates would get soggy and they would wind up eating paper with their food. I told them I was tired of eating off of dirty dishes and silverware and if Ryan wasn't going to take pride in his chores and do a good job then not only would he not get paid his allowance, but they could get used to eating with paper and plastic. Not surprisingly he then realized that there was a definite connection between just doing something to get by and doing a good job. After that there weren't any other problems that summer with him doing his chores right the first time instead of taking short cuts.

The weekend in June that everything finally blew up, Marc had been evasive every time I asked him when he was leaving to take Ryan back to his mom. She had recently moved with a boyfriend to South Carolina and so they were going to meet half-way in Georgia over a weekend. Since I knew that it had been a stressful summer for all of us, I wanted to try to plan a fun trip to Valdosta and the Wild Adventures theme park for us as a family and mostly to try to cheer up Ryan since he was unhappy with having to move to South Carolina and leave all of his friends from school. Not knowing when exactly they were meeting, it was difficult for me to ask for time off from work or make hotel reservations. Finally he told me that they were not meeting in Georgia, she was in fact, going to be picking him up at the house because she wanted to "inspect" it.

Before Marc and I married, but after we were engaged, I had issued an invitation for her to come to see my house where her son would be staying during school breaks and summer vacations. I knew that if the situation was reversed I would want to know where my son would be staying when he was away from me for an extended period of time, and felt that it would

also let her know that I was willing to be a cooperative part of their lives. The invitation was declined. Later, after we married whenever I made any home repairs, improvements, or got new furniture to make the house more comfortable for two more people living there, the subject of the house and the money I was spending became a topic for fights between her and Marc. Every time something was done or bought, he felt it necessary to brag to her how much it cost, especially when I had redecorated the spare bedroom to Ryan's specifications so that he would feel like he had some-place of his own, even if just for two months a year. We had repainted the walls, replaced the light fixture with a new ceiling fan and light kit. Ryan had picked out a futon bunk bed combo that I hoped would encourage him to invite over some of his new friends from the summer day camp he attended while we were at work. He had become enamored with Samurai, and so the room had been decorated with themed posters and Oriental décor that he picked out, matching sheets and comforters. Each time Marc told Marie how much things had cost, or what had been done, she would insist that he wasn't paying her enough child support and the fights would begin. Later, when she demanded her right to "inspect" the house, I told Marc that the invitation had been rescinded. I did not want her in the house where she could see with her own eyes the extent of my remodeling efforts or furniture purchases—things that were paid for with MY income alone. If she was truly concerned about the environment Ryan was living in, I was more than willing to have Florida's Child Services come inspect the house, but she was not welcome.

When Marc and I became engaged, his father (yes, *his* father) insisted that I have a pre-nuptial agreement drawn up to protect myself and my home from Marc's ex-wife. Unfortunately, when I refinanced the house to pay off some of Marc's collection accounts after we were married the lender insisted that Marc's name be put on the loan and the deed—thus voiding our pre-nuptial agreement. Marc immediately agreed to draw up a post-nuptial agreement, but at that point I never imagined we would be divorcing, so it was something that just kept getting postponed. When I finally realized over a year later that our marriage was not what I thought it was the post-nuptial agreement became a priority. Marc, however, now refused to sign unless it specifically stated what he would get in the event of a divorce. Considering that he came into the marriage with less than nothing, I was tempted to tell him he would leave with exactly what he came in with, but I

needed him to sign a quit claim on the house and didn't want to start an ugly fight over it. I still didn't believe that we would get a divorce. This was supposed to be my "happily ever after" urban myth. We just needed to work out the bugs with our relationship and how he dealt with his ex-wife.

When Marc told me that Marie would be picking Ryan up at the house, I told him that was not going to be possible. She could come to the city if he just didn't want to spend the time or money to drive to meet her, but she was not to set foot in the house and he would need to make other arrangements with her. Angrily he left the room and two days later he told me they would be meeting the following Friday morning at 10 a.m. in Lake City since she was apparently living in Florida again.

The Wednesday before they were to meet, Marc and Ryan went out to the base where he was assigned to play pool at his squadron club house. For whatever reason, he left his cell phone behind—something he had never done before since it was almost an extension of his ear most of the time. When it rang unexpectedly, it startled me and when it later beeped signaling a message was waiting, I did something I had never, ever done before with any friend, boyfriend, or husband. I looked to see who had called.

See, trust for me is a big thing. Trust and honesty. They were things I gave unconditionally (notice the important use of the past tense verb there). They were things that I expected to get in my relationships as well. I respected Ryan's privacy in his bedroom and with phone calls to and from his mom. I also respected Marc's privacy with regards to the computer (which I bought), his email account, or cell phone even though I paid all the bills for them. I never went through his dresser drawers or his closet. I never thought I had a reason to—even when he acted secretive or blatantly lied to me about money I thought that he was just embarrassed about his financial problems. So when that little voice inside my head started to scream at me to listen to the message, especially since I was paying the bill for it, my first impulse was to tell it to shut up.

But it persisted… and I listened to the message.

Marie had called and left a message asking for directions to the house because MapQuest only gave her directions to the main street in town. The whole "meeting in Lake City" was just another lie. At that moment, I committed myself to divorcing him.

I deleted the message and deleted the calls on his cell phone's missed call log. When they returned from playing pool I said nothing about the call

and acted as if nothing was wrong. The next day when I went to work, I told my boss I had a situation I needed to take care of on Friday and would be taking a day of vacation. Saturday I had been scheduled to teach a writing seminar at the university where I taught part-time. I cancelled it.

Friday morning Marc and Ryan were up early. I should have been too… if I was going to work that is. Instead I listened to them moving things around in Ryan's bedroom and fell back to sleep. When Marc came in and shook me awake, saying that I was going to be late for work, I just rolled over and said that I wasn't going to work—I was taking the day off to get some things done around the house.

I wish now I had a picture of his face at that moment. It was one of those priceless moments when everything stands still and even the Earth stops spinning for a few seconds.

While I lay in bed for a little while thinking about the panic in his eyes and the shock on his face, I overheard him downstairs arguing with his ex-wife on his cell phone. He and Ryan spend the rest of the day whispering back and forth, stopping whenever I came into the room. When I asked when they were leaving to meet his ex-wife, he said the plans had changed and they would be meeting her on Saturday instead. I said fine, and went about my day doing chores and catching up on letters. I also started to inventory every single thing in the house and mark things with an "M" that I was willing to let him take when I asked him to leave. When he asked me at one point what I was doing, I told him we really needed to get the post-nuptial done and so I was listing what he would get if we ever divorced just like he wanted. He didn't ask me anything again the rest of the day.

The writing seminar was to have started at 10 a.m. on Saturday, and the drive to Lake City was almost two hours away, so Marc and Ryan left the house around 8 a.m. Saturday morning. I called him at 10:30 a.m. to find out if he was on his way home yet, and after a confused answer that no, he said they were still talking, and he asked why I wasn't in my writing seminar. When I told him I had cancelled it and would be home all day, he was silent as I went on to tell him that when he came home, he needed to start packing because I wanted him out of the house within two weeks and that I was filing for a divorce.

As it turned out Marie was homeless and had been living out of a rental car for several weeks. They had counted on using my "trust" in them against me—knowing that I respected 72 Ryan's privacy and would not

open his closed bedroom door unless invited in by him. Their plan was to sneak her into the house while I was at work and let her stay in Ryan's room. For how long I don't know.

She never did come to the house, and Ryan didn't go back to live with her. Marc and Ryan moved out two weeks later. Before the divorce became final he admitted that he had never really loved me. He just needed someone to keep him in the lifestyle to which he had wanted to become accustomed to. He just wanted someone to get him out of debt and support him enough so he could get custody of his son. I haven't seen or spoken to him since then.

Trust. Respect. Honesty. Those are critical things in a marriage, in a relationship of any kind. I was crushed.

While my marriage was disintegrating, my father's health continued to get worse. In mid-October he was admitted to the hospital for a collapsed lung. Two weeks later my divorce was final. Dad was in the hospital for 37 days, getting out the Monday before Thanksgiving. By mid-December he was put in hospice care and died three months later. It took me almost a year to settle his estate and sell the house.

My entire share of the proceeds went to clear up the debt that Marc had left me with. By the end of the year, I was free and clear of all the debt and almost back to where I had been before I met him. It was almost as good as getting a "do-over" if there hadn't been the memories of them, the "what ifs," and the doubled mortgage payment.

After Marc and Ryan left two good things did happen (as if them leaving wasn't good enough!). The first thing was that my stress-induced pain started to lessen. The second was that Trooper stopped throwing up.

He was still afraid, but when he suddenly stopped throwing up, I began to realize that something had been going on with him that involved Marc and Ryan. My previous marriage had been controlling, manipulative, verbally and emotionally abusive. For almost ten years I had lived in fear of him—fear which manifested in physical illnesses—illnesses that had miraculously disappeared within three months of leaving him. Fear.

What a powerful emotion that is. We will rearrange our lives just to avoid something we are afraid of. We will suffer humiliation, pain, loss, and do things we thought we never would because of fear. We will put ourselves last just to keep that fear at bay.

Finally, something I could understand.

Chapter 7

Mystery Solved

I've come to believe that things always happen for a reason, and we don't always know the reason right away. With finally figuring out Trooper's issues and helping him through those, I also had to face some of my own issues and resolve those in the process.

That summer I had enrolled in a holistic animal care course through a distance learning college. My goal was to learn as much as I could to try to help Tink. She continued to develop bladder stones and was getting bladder infections every three or four months. Tink's spine and hips were also giving her problems and I suspected she had arthritis and hip dysplasia. Because of her impaired liver and the shunts, the vet had to be very careful what kind of medications she was given since even the smallest amount of the wrong thing could prove fatally toxic for her. I was hoping that the certificate program would give me alternatives for her that would supplement what the Vet was recommending. At the very least I hoped it would give me enough information to ask the right questions and understand the answers and options.

Both dogs were my practice subjects and they willingly let me practice massage and Tellington TTouch techniques on them. Trooper absolutely loves to have his paws massaged now and will close his eyes and drool while I work on them. I read about aromatherapy and ordered flower essences that I hoped would rid Trooper of some of his fears, soothe some of Tink's pain, and also lift some of my depression and grief. I researched natural and Chinese herbs and supplemented their food with them. I put everyone—cats and I included—on organic foods that were holistically prepared. I practiced acupressure points on Tink to try to alleviate her hip pain.

I had also picked up several books by animal intuitive consultants after watching the Pet Psychic on the Animal Planet Channel. My hope was that they would help me learn how to communicate with Trooper so I could understand his fears and the origin of them. While he had stopped throwing up, he continued to be afraid of almost everything, and of almost every man we encountered. Only a few men were able to get close enough to touch him at that point, and I worried about what would happen if he ever broke free from his leash again. No one would be able to approach him to help me catch him, and if he were injured in his flight of fear, he might do more damage to himself by continuing to try to get away.

I read one book in an entire weekend, then two others while trying the exercises they gave for learning how to intuitively communicate with animals. I had been talking to my companion animals my entire life, but never even thought they would—or could—communicate back to me. The little idiosyncrasies of their personalities often made me "think" they understood or were responding to what I was saying, and I would sometimes attach human emotions to their behaviors. But to actually communicate with them—as in a two way conversation—I just didn't think that was possible. Looking back now at all I have learned I can see that I had been having "conversations" with my companion animals all along, just sometimes, as in the case of Snookums, I wasn't listening.

I tried one book's exercises with Trooper, and at times it felt like I was beginning to "feel" some of what Trooper's fears were, but wasn't sure it was really him—and not just me imposing my own thoughts and emotions onto him since I was so close to him. I was also still deeply hurt by how Marc had used me. In desperation I went to one of the websites to learn more and finally sent an email asking for a consultation. Within a few days we had set up a date and time for me to call her and she would communicate with Trooper.

I have to admit that even though I had read all of her books by then, I still scoured websites and did a search on her name looking for complaints or indications of fraud. I found nothing but praise for her, but I was still hesitant. I just didn't know what more the animal intuitive would be able to tell me about Trooper that I didn't already know. I was still skeptical of the whole "two-way conversation" idea.

It turned out that I didn't have to worry about what she would tell me… it was what Trooper would tell her!

I called her at the appointed time and we chatted for a few minutes. I had emailed her a picture of Trooper, but had really not told her anything else about him—or me. I felt that the less I told her about us, the more I would be able to validate because she wouldn't have any knowledge unless it was something that she had received from Trooper. As she left the line briefly to talk with him I watched Trooper's sleeping face to see if there would be any indication that someone was telepathically communicating with him. I don't know what I expected to see… a startled look or his ears perking up, maybe. But he continued to sleep, oblivious to me.

When she came back on the line, the first thing she said was that Trooper loved me very much. (Duh!) Then what she said to me next stunned me into momentary silence. Trooper had told her that there used to be a man and a boy who lived with us who mistreated him because they didn't like me. They also didn't like the fact that he liked me so they did things to him to scare him all the time, and because they couldn't do anything directly to me. Then he told her that the man and the boy didn't live with us anymore and he was very happy that they were gone.

I hadn't told her about Marc and Ryan.

Recently when I was relaying this story to my very skeptical brother, he asked whether or not I had given her my name, that perhaps she had researched me as well. I told him that even if she had, all she would have found was perhaps a record of our marriage, but no reference to Ryan because I wasn't his bio-mom. She also wouldn't have found anything that would have shown that they didn't live with me anymore since my divorce had not been final long enough for it to appear in any public records online. The only way she could have gotten that knowledge was straight from … the dog's mouth.

When I was able to get a grip on the thoughts that were running wild through my mind after her statement I was able to ask her a question. "What can I do to make Trooper less afraid?"

After she consulted with him again, she came back on the line and told me that Trooper wanted to go to school, and he wanted to get a job. "Great," I thought, "how am I going to manage that?" I asked what kind of school he wanted, and she said he just wanted to be trained to do a job. We talked about options that might work for him considering how skittish he currently was. Tink had been a P.A.W.S. (Pets Are Working Saints) dog for a while and I had taken her to visit patients in nursing homes until her

bladder surgeries side-lined her. I wasn’t sure if that would be suitable for Trooper at that point because I knew that the equipment in many of the rooms would scare him, and there would be no way I could convince him to ride in an elevator at one of the centers. I told her I would think on it for a while and figure something out, then asked her if there was anything else he wanted to say or anything else I could do to make him happy. She said he just wanted to tell me that he was very happy with me and that Tink was “his” girl. That brought a smile and a laugh from me.

From the moment Trooper had arrived in the house, Tink had been almost inseparable from him and quickly established herself as the Alpha dog in the house. While he was still the same size as her (even as a nine week old puppy, he was never smaller than her) that seemed to work, but as he grew it became almost comical to see the two of them play or sleep together. Tink could easily run circles under him, and frequently did when they played. She loved to get directly under him and bite his elbows when they were rough-housing. For his part, when we were in the open field near my house, Trooper loved to play-stalk her then run up and roll her in the dirt. She would get so angry at him and would chase him down the road cussing at him. I could almost hear him laughing as he ran at least five lengths ahead of her. As her arthritis caused her more pain I would sometimes see her trying to hide behind a small bunch of weeds when he stopped focusing on bathroom duties, knowing that his attention would then turn to stalking her. If you’ve ever seen a picture of a very large person trying to hide behind a very small tree, you have some idea of what Tink looked like trying to hide behind a few weeds!

Whenever Tink had to spend a night at the vet’s for a test or procedure, Trooper wouldn’t be able to sleep or rest. He would pace the house, going from room to room, door to door trying to figure out where she was. It was touching to see how much he cared for her.

Chapter 8

Positive Affirmations

After our conversation with the animal intuitive, I had to start thinking of what kind of training I could get for Trooper that would help to restore his confidence. Obedience training seemed like a logical option, but really rather redundant since we had such a good rapport that he already knew most of the commands and was pretty good at obeying them. Plus that really wouldn't get him a job anywhere.

A few years earlier I had seen a news clip one morning about a kennel in Virginia that was sending toys and treats to the Military Working Dogs (MWD) that were deployed for the war. It seemed that the dogs were starting to have neurotic behavioral issues because of the constant stress and negativity of the war, especially those that were used to find bodies. As a result, some of the dogs were being sent home early because they were unable to perform their jobs. The toys and treats gave not only the dogs but their handlers an outlet for their stress. That Halloween, Marc and I threw a costume party and asked everyone to bring a toy or a box of treats to ship over to three units of MWD and their handlers. I had gotten an address for the unit deployed from the local Air Force base, and also addresses sent to me by two friends who were deployed for two Army MWD teams that were on the bases they were at. We had such an outpouring of toys and treats from the party that I was able to ship six large boxes in early November. The next year we had the same themed costume party, and I was able to ship four boxes to the unit deployed from the local Air Force base.

I started thinking about the training the police and military dogs get, and wondered if that might be the right type of training for Trooper. Not to that extent, of course, but just a condensed version. I wanted him to be confident and assertive, but not aggressive. I contacted a local guard dog trainer and

arranged for two sessions for Trooper. For the first session, the trainer came to the house and worked with us. I had told Trooper that he would be coming to the house and that this was going to be the training that he wanted. I explained to him that he was going to learn to be a guard dog because his job was going to be to protect Tink and the house.

The trainer tried to come and stand between Trooper and me to see how Trooper reacted. Initially when he came into the house, Trooper did his bark, run, bark, run to the top of the stairs, and bark routine. But when he started to move between Trooper and me, he immediately came downstairs and stood between us. He wasn't aggressive, but instead was leaning into me, pushing me away from the trainer. Trooper continued to push me farther away from him but did not bark or run. I could tell he was uncomfortable with the situation, but was doing his best to overcome his fears in his desire to protect me.

The next session was done one night at their office in a fenced in yard. I was to walk Trooper on his lead back and forth in the front of the building. The trainer put on a baseball hat, a scarf across his face, protective arm wraps, and came from behind the building cracking a small whip and yelling at us. I didn't know what to expect from Trooper, but he immediately dropped all of his fears and charged towards the "attacker," hackles raised and barking in a defensive tone I had never heard before. He was actually scary sounding! It was all I could do to hold him back on the lead. The trainer stayed while he barked for a few seconds, then turned and ran away—I had been told that if Trooper acted aggressively toward him, I was to let the lead slack just enough for Trooper to run forward and feel like he was chasing him off. As soon as he was behind the building and out of eyesight, I was to praise Trooper with treats and hugs.

The difference in Trooper was apparent almost immediately. Every morning I would tell Trooper that it was his job to protect Tink and the house and I trusted him because I knew he was a brave dog and wasn't afraid of anything. As his confidence grew, his fears began to disappear. In the past a plastic grocery bag left on the floor would prevent him from coming into the kitchen, now he just glances at it and walks by. Rearranged furniture used to cause him to panic; now he just sniffs and ignores it. A piece of trash blowing in the field would cause him to bark and run away. Now he chases to catch it and bring it to me so I can throw it in the dumpster. While a loud noise will still startle him, he does not react in fear

like he used to. He used to be so afraid of the dark that he refused to move beyond the range of street lights. Now his favorite game to play is flashlight tag in the dark. When he was challenged at the dog park previously, he had behaved submissively, rolling on his back. The next time the same dog challenged him, he stood his ground and it was instead the other dog that backed down and submitted. Trooper's confidence was returning.

There are only a few fears that really remain from before. But they are gradually going away as well. One of the strongest and most frustrating is his fear of being on the bed at night when the lights are out. Marc used to kick him viciously when Trooper tried to get on the bed with us at night. Towards the end of our marriage I caught him kicking him as I came in for bed one night and told him if he didn't want Trooper on the bed, then he needed to tell him to get down—but kicking him from under the covers was not an option. I don't know how often he had done it before that night, or how many times he did it later that I didn't know about. But regardless, Trooper will not stay on the bed with me once the lights are out. If I'm watching TV, or we are sleeping late on a Saturday morning after the sun has come up, he will stay for hours. I know that eventually that fear will go away like the others did and so patiently encourage him and wait.

I talk to Trooper all the time and he loves when I talk directly into his ear in a low voice as we are sitting together on the sofa or lying in bed. I tell him that he is the most intelligent dog I have ever had, how proud I am of him and how compassionate he is. I tell him I know that he is a brave dog and isn't afraid of anything. I tell him how handsome he is and how much I love and appreciate him. What a good job he does protecting me, the house, and all the other pets. I tell him how much I believe in him, and what a wonderful blessing it has been to have him in my life.

Positive affirmations. They should be called "powerful" affirmations. They can have even more power when a person hears them.

For many years I never heard anything positive about myself. I was stupid. I was boring. I was ugly and fat. I would be a horrible mother if I was ever dumb enough to get pregnant. I was a terrible wife who couldn't cook or clean anywhere near as well as his mother—who not only kept a spotless house with fantastic meals three times a day, but also worked full time, AND raised her three boys practically alone. She apparently walked on water too. I know that sounded sarcastic, but it wasn't meant to be. Will told me many times during our marriage how lacking I was as wife and a

person compared to his mother but I learned later it was far from the truth. My “other” mother and I had—and still have—a great relationship. She let me know early on that she wasn’t nearly as perfect as her son made her sound. We used to joke that I got custody of her in the divorce, something Will didn’t think was as funny as we did. We stay in touch even now and it has been seven years since I divorced her son. I love her as much as if she were my own bio-mom.

It took me a long time to feel that I deserved any happiness because all of the joy had been squashed out of me for so many years. My positive affirmations in the beginning came from strangers who knew nothing of me or my life. Fellow students when I was working on my MBA who would ask me to work on group projects with them because they respected my work; co-workers who came to me for advice or help with a software issue. It wasn’t so much what they said to me or how they said it—it was just the fact that they wanted to include me. They didn’t think I was stupid, they asked my opinion and I was actually allowed to have one. As I began to make more and more friends through work or school, I realized that they didn’t think I was boring either. In fact, most of the time we spent as much time laughing as we did working or studying.

When I finally got the courage to leave that marriage, it still took me a long time to reach a place where I felt totally confident in myself again. I had to learn to stop questioning myself and second guessing everyone else’s intentions. I had to learn to trust again. Unfortunately, just when I finally reached a point of trusting again, I trusted too much and Marc took advantage of that.

As much as I was hurting from Marc’s deceit, I knew that I needed to focus on getting Trooper to trust men again. While his other fears had diminished, it was crucial that he regain confidence in men again, and that was something I knew would take a lot of patience. He had already gotten used to the men who worked at the day care center that he and Tink went to occasionally. Now I needed to get him used just being able to walk down the street or be in the neighborhood without being afraid of unfamiliar men.

Chapter 9

Trust and Respect

Trust is something that is often first given freely and then when lost has to be earned. I knew that getting Trooper to trust men again was going to be a slow and patient process. “Going to school” and “getting a job” would boost his confidence. Positive reinforcement would help to calm his fears. But getting him to trust men again wasn’t going to be so easy.

Using the day care as a start, I asked that he be handled by as many different men as possible and not just the women that worked at the kennel. I wanted him to learn to trust different men in a familiar and friendly setting.

Next I started to introduce him to men who lived near me by throwing parties for my neighbors. I didn’t push him on anyone, but would let him reach his own comfort level for approaching someone. I started telling him in advance if there were going to be men in the house. I was getting some long overdue house repairs done and so each time would talk him through everything that was going to happen before the repairman would arrive. As much as possible I used the same repairman for all my work so that he could establish a consistent trust with them. Paul does excellent work, and over time Trooper began to trust him enough to be able to go up to him when he needed to go for a walk. Fortunately Paul is understanding and patient enough to stop his work and actually take him for a walk!

But as much as Trooper has come to trust Paul, he still has trouble trusting some of his helpers. They have done work for me off and on over the last few years, and each time Trooper sees one man in particular he will bark at him and not let him approach him. For whatever reasons, Trooper doesn’t trust him, and while I have not yet formed my own opinion of him, I do respect Trooper’s feelings and won’t force the issue with him.

Trust and respect. Two very key elements in any relationship. Trooper has come so far in his recovery from the abuse because he trusted me, he knows that I trust him, and he knows that I respect him enough to know his boundaries and to let him stay within his comfort zones. When we had been approached by any men in the past—familiar or unfamiliar—Trooper would bark and run or stand behind me if he was on the lead. Now he recognizes familiar men with a wagging tail and an eagerness to greet them. Unfamiliar men are greeted with defensive barking that warns them to stay back unless I tell him it is o.k. and introduce them. He continues to put himself between me and any man, and there are only a few neighbors and friends that he is relaxed enough around to be able to wander into another room to nap while we talk. When he does bark at anyone now—man or woman—I respect his instincts and keep distance between us. While I have never had to test the limits that are part of his "job" to protect me, the other pets and the house, there has been only one time when someone else was foolish enough to test him.

Not long after his training I took him one afternoon to the dog park. For a while we were the only ones in the park, and then a woman and her dog arrived. Her dog was semi-aggressive toward me and so I moved to put a bench between us. He soon lost interest and went to the far side of the park. His owner, however, did not follow him and Trooper began barking at her. For reasons I will never understand the woman began to taunt him, calling him names and lunging at him repeatedly. Trooper would bark, back off, and bark again, but each time she lunged at him I noticed that he was becoming more and more agitated and aggressive and the space between them was closing. Both of them were ignoring my request for her to stop and for him to sit and stay. I had never seen him so angry and so defensive and it was starting to scare me. He was baring his teeth and every hair on his body was standing up. I decided it was time for us to leave before he actually attacked her (although a part of me felt she deserved it) and after a very frustrating time when I came close to just decking the woman myself to keep her from continuing to taunt Trooper, I got him back on the leash and we left the park. I immediately complained to the park owners and it was a long time before I took him back. But as a result of that showdown, I have no doubt that he will do whatever he feels is necessary to protect me.

Recently a friend and former neighbor, Ashley, stopped by to visit when she was in town. She has two dogs, Ziggy, a dachshund, and Lily, a terrier

mix she rescued in Italy. When she had been a neighbor they all often came over to visit so we sometimes had a house full of dogs with Tink, Trooper, Lily, Ziggy and Ripkin. After we talked for a while she asked me what I had done to Trooper. I was confused. She hadn't seen him in almost two years, and so when she last saw him he was at the peak of his fears and insecurities. For me, the improvements in him were gradual and subtle. But when she saw him, she said it was like night and day. He seemed happier and relaxed. That was the best thing I could have heard.

By helping Trooper … I've been helped as well. In the process of both of us learning to trust again, we have opened our hearts to love again.

The funny thing about love is that you can't have love without heartbreak. Otherwise, how would you know love when it arrived? Without the rain, we cannot have rainbows. The same is with love. Without sadness, we cannot know joy, and all too often we forget that the unconditional love and joy our pets bring us sometimes comes with a responsibility to accept sadness.

Chapter 10

Love

This will be—is—and was a hard chapter to write. You've probably picked up on the past tense reference I've used when talking about Tink, so you already know how it ends. Unfortunately, the tense changes were recent. When I started writing this book, she was still running to greet me every day when I came home from work, or bossing me around when she thought I had spent too much time on the computer. She was still squeaking with excitement as we drove to day care, coming home exhausted to snore at my feet or on my lap as we all crowded onto the sofa to watch TV. The pain of losing her is still fresh. An open wound. Both Trooper and I miss her terribly. When she passed I had to put this aside for a few weeks because I had just started to write this chapter… with a happier ending in mind.

But it is a chapter that I have to write because Tink was—and is—a huge part of Trooper's story. And mine. She was a part of our healing and if we hadn't known her sweet face and happy tail we would have missed out on so much. The unconditional love she gave to both of us was so much more than what most of us probably ever experience. So go grab a box of Kleenex—I've already got two boxes here—and I'll tell you about the strongest and bravest pug I've ever met.

While I was working so hard to restore Trooper's confidence, I was also doing everything I could to try to ease Tink's pain and health issues. When she was about a year old, I noticed that she was urinating more often and that it was orange tinged or bloody and so took her to the vet. She had a bladder infection, what would turn out to be the first of many. Antibiotics cured the infection, but then she started passing bladder stones when she urinated—sometimes as large as the nail on my little finger—and always

without even a cry of pain. Analysis of the stones showed that they were Struvite Uroliths and an x-ray showed that her bladder was almost completely full of them, requiring surgical removal in March, a year after I had gotten her. Her recovery took about two months before she really acted like herself again, and she was put on a prescription diet after the surgery to discourage formation of new ones, but that unfortunately was not successful. By December she was again passing stones and had a bladder infection. X-rays again showed that her bladder was completely full of stones and another surgery was done, this time with a longer recovery. A blood test revealed that she had liver shunts and her blood was not being fully detoxified which was contributing to the stone formation. It was a condition that did not have a high surgical recommendation because of how extensive the surgery could be with limited positive outcome. They wouldn't know what they were looking at as far as repairs until they actually got in there, and there may not be any possible fixes depending on whether or not her shunts were congenital or had formed later. Most puppies born with congenital liver shunts didn't live long, and she was now over two years old. At that time I made the decision not to subject her to another surgery and started to look at alternatives.

I gave her only distilled water to drink to avoid the minerals and chemicals in tap water. She stayed on a low protein prescription diet until she started to put on more weight from the high carbohydrates and so I started researching organic foods, trying everything I could to reduce her weight gain, but still try to help avoid stone formation. The vet told me that when her blood reached toxic levels, she would begin to have seizures, dementia and would become emaciated. I figured that her extra weight gave her a little bit of an edge to give me more time to find a way to help her. I started taking her to day care more often to give her more exercise and avoid the couch potato pug bottom we were both starting to have. At day care I learned that she stayed active all day, running and defending "the hill" with one of her rat pack buddies. She would come home exhausted, often falling asleep in the car, and would snore loudly until I woke her when we got home or took her up to bed.

As she got older, she got slower. Arthritis was developing in her hips and spine, and she also had severe dysplasia in one hip. When she began to limp on a front leg, x-rays showed arthritis in her elbow and shadows that could possibly indicate developing tumors.

But in spite of all the pain she must have been feeling from the persistent bladder stones, frequent bladder infections and arthritis she never whined or cried, and never slowed down. I started to have to limit how often she went to day care, taking her only once or twice a week with a few days between just so that her joints could rest and her limping would be less pronounced. She would be furious when Trooper and I left without her and I could hear her angry barks as the garage door closed behind us. When we returned at the end of the day, however, all was forgiven and we were showered with pug snot and kisses.

Medications—especially pain medications—were limited because of the impact on her liver. The safest alternative was equivalent to an aspirin and only once a day so I usually gave it to her at night so she could sleep better. I also started her on a liquid Milk Thistle extract twice a day in her food to help her liver function.

In January 2008 when she started to throw up undigested food from the day before, I worried another problem had developed and she spent a day at the vet's getting x-rays and blood work. X-rays showed what we already knew. Her bladder was full of stones. Her liver was smaller than normal and tucked up under her ribs in a hard to reach place. There weren't any obvious issues with her stomach so she was referred for an ultrasound.

When her blood work results came back, the vet waited 48 hours before calling me. The results were so off the chart abnormal that she consulted one of the teaching universities for advice. Tink's liver was technically non-functioning. Levels like hers had not been seen in a live dog that was as healthy otherwise as Tink was. She should have been dead, but was very obviously not. She wasn't even suffering seizures or dementia, and was certainly not emaciated. Early on when she started to put on weight from one of the first prescription diets, a neighbor's little boy started calling her his "Little Sausage" and the nickname still fit. The university recommended a surgical biopsy of her liver. I could take her to them and leave her there for tests and then pick her up a few days later. There were risks of course—she might not survive the surgery based on her liver function tests even though she appeared to be perfectly healthy. I refused the recommendation. The last thing I wanted Tink to remember was her "mom" turning her over to strangers who would torture her with needles before she died. No thank you.

When she went for her ultrasound, she had to fast from the night before. I was diligent about removing every possible speck of food or treat from her reach the night before, and when she didn't get breakfast the next morning she stomped her feet and grumbled at me. So when the vet called and asked why I had given her food I was shocked. The ultrasound had showed food in her stomach, and a possible mass as well. I told him there was no way she had gotten anything to eat in the last 12 hours. His recommendation was a follow-up ultrasound in 30 days, or an endoscopy to biopsy the mass. I decided to wait and looked for other alternatives. I wasn't comfortable with any kind of invasive tests on her. I was worried she wouldn't survive.

I took her to a vet that offered holistic and alternative treatments on the recommendation of my regular vet office. She had a water acupuncture treatment with B-12 injections, and was put on Chinese herbs and a dehydrated raw food diet supplemented with steamed meats. After the first treatment, she seemed to respond well—better than expected. But after her second treatment she seemed to crash. Her pain intensified and for the first time she woke me several nights in a row thrashing and crying in pain. A second ultrasound didn't show any mass on her stomach, but it also didn't show any obvious reason for her sudden increase in pain. Her gall bladder was slightly enlarged, but didn't show any stones, and her liver again looked abnormally small. They also wanted to do surgical biopsies of her liver and gall bladder, but I refused. The risks were too high.

I decided then that if she wasn't going to have quantity—a long life - that she was going to have quality. I stopped all treatment except for occasional pain medications and natural herbs. No more painful needle sticks for blood draws. No more tests or ultrasounds.

She went to day care any day she wasn't obviously limping because she just got so much joy from going. She stayed on a low protein diet, but wasn't severely restricted. When she wanted a treat, she got one as long as the proteins were less than 10%. She preferred raw baby carrots because they were so crunchy. When she grumbled that I'd been on the computer too long, I logged off and sat with her on my lap watching TV. I learned to hold a book and turn pages with just one hand when she fell asleep on my other arm. At night when she slept on top of the covers between my legs I learned how to ease my legs up to my chin without waking her when I needed to go to the bathroom—or when a leg cramp woke me.

I talked to her constantly, telling her how much we loved her, how happy she made us, and what a wonderful dog she was. I gave her massages every night. When she was too sore to go to day care, I would take her for a ride around the block and let her sit on my lap with her head out the window, the breeze making her little ears flap. She was happy.

Trooper sensed a change in how I was treating her and while he still played and stalked her, he seemed to be extra gentle with her. More often than not I would come home from work to find the two of them curled up together on the sofa. He was extra protective of her when we were outside or people were in the house. Even the cats seemed to treat her differently. Ebony had always given her face a bath, but now I even caught Oreo giving her kisses occasionally and Mandy would sleep next to her on the bed.

There is a Contemporary Christian song by Toby Mac called “Love Is in the House” and part of the chorus line is “Love is in the house and the house is packed, so much so I left the back door cracked.” That was our house with Tink in it. She didn’t have any special talents—she couldn’t whisper or speak when asked, but she could sure grumble and mumble when she wanted attention. She didn’t always come on command—her “hearing” was selective and dependent upon whether or not she was done meeting and greeting someone else or if you had a treat in your hand. While she was house-broken, there were times when her bladder stones would suddenly shift and the pressure built up by the urine would cause her to suddenly let loose—there wasn’t any intent when it happened and the shocked look on my face was matched by her own. She could be demanding, stubborn, and at times snored loud enough to shake drown out the sound on the TV or radio. But she could love. She loved everyone unconditionally. No questions asked. She didn’t care who you were, where you came from or what you had done. She loved and was always happy to see us. Her love was so powerful it could heal all of us. It did heal all of us.

I thought we could go on like that forever.

Chapter 11

Letting Go

In May I had spent a ten day vacation in Alaska reconnecting with a long lost cousin and the dogs had been boarded where they went to day care so I knew that both of them would be well cared for. I had thought carefully about whether or not to board Tink and had looked at getting someone to stay at the house with her, but finally decided that both dogs would be miserable if they were separated for that long. Explicit instructions were left for Tink to only get a few days of exercise so that she would not get over tired, and both dogs were kenneled in the same run at night so they could sleep together like they did at home. I left enough pain medicine for her to get a dose every night, and since she would be getting it more often, put less in each dose than what I usually gave her every two or three nights. A friend would check on the cats every other day. All my bases were covered.

When I returned home and picked up the dogs they were ecstatic to see me. Tink didn't appear to be limping any more than normal so I wasn't worried about her. At the house, Mandy meowed and yelled at me for almost 18 hours before I finally was forgiven for leaving. The first few days I was home it was impossible for me to do anything alone. Even going to the bathroom in the small half bath downstairs I had both dogs and at least one cat crowding in to make sure I wasn't stepping into some Star Trek transporter and disappearing again without them. Sleeping at night was more like a contortionist's act. Trooper took up half of the bed to my side, Tink was on the covers between my legs, Ebony and Mandy each took a corner at the end of the bed, and Oreo demanded that we "spoon." I woke up stiff and sore but knowing without a doubt that I was loved.

The second week after my return though, I began to sense a change in Tink. She was suddenly sleeping later, not greeting me at the door, reluctant

to eat, and whenever I held her and talked to her, I just got a sense of being sick and tired of being sick and tired. I was still jet lagged a week after the trip since I had been up almost 48 hours for the return flight and then immediately jumped back into work the day after I returned. I wasn't sure if it was my own exhaustion I was sensing, or Tink's. One night she was already on the bed while

I finished getting ready and as I walked into the bedroom I caught her off guard - with her "mask" off. She was leaning against the footboard of the bed, shaking uncontrollably, and her face was pulled so far back in a grimace of pain that she barely had a wrinkle over her nose. I was shocked and immediately asked her what was wrong. Just as quickly, she put the mask back on. Her face relaxed back to normal, and she weakly wagged her tail and laid down for me to rub her belly and give her a massage as if she was totally fine. But I had seen her face and I knew that the time had come for me to make the most humane decision I could for her. I knew I never wanted to see so much pain on her face again.

I had told her since the beginning of the year when she first started having more pain that as soon as she let me know she wasn't having fun anymore, I would take her to the vet and we would make sure she wasn't in pain any more. I had hoped—like all pet lovers do—that I would never have to make that decision. It wasn't the first time I had made it for a beloved pet in pain, but that still didn't make it any easier. I knew then that the sense of being sick and tired of being sick and tired wasn't my own exhaustion, but it was Tink trying to tell me that it was time. She wasn't having fun anymore.

The next morning as I took her out before I went to work I noticed that her urine was orange and thought briefly that perhaps it was just another bladder infection that was making her uncomfortable. I could just make an appointment with the vet and get her on another round of antibiotics. But it would have been the third time in six months and I knew that it was just delaying the inevitable. I called the vet once I got to work and made an appointment for that afternoon. Then I called the animal intuitive that had helped me with Trooper.

I had to be sure. I had to know that I was doing the right thing and I wasn't acting on impulse. I knew in my heart that I wasn't, and I knew it was time, but I still needed to hear it from Tink. I wasn't able at that point to be emotionally detached enough to be objective. She communicated with

Tink and relayed to me that if it could have been possible, Tink would have like to be able to stay with me forever because she loved me so much, but it was just so hard and she hurt so much. Tink told her to tell me that she would still be with me, watching over me, and that we would meet again.

When I got home to pick her up I told both her and Trooper where we were going and what was going to happen. I told her that she wouldn't be in pain anymore and that she would be able to run and be happy. I took Trooper with us. I knew that he wouldn't understand if I took her away and didn't come back with her, that he would worry and pace the house like he did when she spent the night at the vet's for tests. He needed to understand. He would need closure just like I needed confirmation.

Tink was happy about the car ride—as always. When we arrived at the office, we were put in one of the rooms to wait until the vet and technician were available. I sat on the floor while Tink ran around in circles and occasionally stopping to give me kisses. She was excited—as if she knew the pain was going to stop. I held her a few times and pet her, telling her she would be free of pain soon. Trooper stood over me, facing the door, as if he was protecting both of us.

The tech came in and took Tink out briefly to put a catheter in her leg. Trooper paced, and unlike his normal quiet behavior, whined a few times at the door, touching the knob with his nose. I told him she would be back, that it wasn't time yet, and he would have a chance to say goodbye. When they brought her back in, she was even more excited, running in circles again. Trooper sniffed her leg and sniffed her face, then resumed a protective stance near me.

I picked Tink up and set her on a blanket on the table. Trooper paced around us as they inserted the medicine into her leg. As I held her and whispered over and over again "no more pain" in her ear, I felt her slump against my arm. I told her how much I loved her and how much we would miss her, but that we would be o.k. and we would see her again one day. Then… she was gone.

After the vet and tech left us alone for a while, I picked her up and sat on the floor with her so Trooper could see her. He hadn't been able to really see her on the table. He came up to her and sniffed her face a few times, and then he laid down, his back to us and facing the wall. The Tink in my arms was not "his girl" anymore. She was gone and he knew it.

I had asked them to do a brief necropsy now that there wasn't any more risk. Her gall bladder and pancreas were enlarged and "not happy" colors. One of them was supposed to be a bright green and instead looked like muddy algae. She didn't have any gall bladder stones, but she did have four times as many bladder stones as we had seen in the past on x-rays and her bladder was extremely distended with indications of another bladder infection. There wasn't any mass on or in her stomach, but the portion of her intestine that attached to the stomach has a sphincter muscle that allows food to pass in increments rather than all at once into the intestines. The muscle was inflamed and so tight that the vet couldn't get her little finger into it. It should have relaxed when she died, but it didn't. Whether or not this was causing her pain, we couldn't know, but it was probably contributing to her throwing up undigested food occasionally. But when the vet went to look at her liver, barely touching it as she started the exam, her liver completely fell apart. It did not have the appearance of hepatitis or cirrhosis, and there weren't any obvious indications of other diseases. Apparently just the pressure of all the other organs around it had been holding it together all this time.

I knew then that I had made the right decisions in refusing to do biopsies earlier in the year. She most likely would have died on the table if they had taken a biopsy of her liver. With all of her internal organs showing such unhappiness and abnormalities, there were numerous things that could have been causing her pain above and beyond just the arthritis and hip dysplasia. Yet Tink whined and cried only in March after her second acupuncture treatment. I had her for a little over six years; she had just turned seven when she died. She never complained. She never whined. She never gave up. She never quit. She was the strongest and bravest dog I've ever known. She simply knew how to love, and I believe that it was her love for us that kept her going all those years when she was in pain. It was her love for me that kept me going so many times when I felt unloved, unwanted and alone.

Chapter 12

Moving Forward

When Trooper and I returned home from the vet office, we were in a pretty sad state of mind. As we got out of the car, I saw that John was home after an extended TDY to the Middle East and Europe. It was one of the rare times that Ripkin didn't stay with us and instead was in Tampa with John's sister. On any other day, Trooper would have been thrilled to see John—even if he had seen him every day for a month he still showed the same excitement each time. This day, however, he was very subdued. He briefly wagged his tail, gave his hand a lick, then turned and walked away. It was almost as if he was saying "Hey, glad you're home, but I just lost my best friend and I don't want to talk about it right now because I'm really sad." Words I said instead.

In the week between Tink's death and Ripkin's return from Tampa, Trooper and I spent a lot of time together. When I went to work, I took him to day care so that he wouldn't be home alone. Several of the caregivers there commented on how subdued he seemed, and I spent more time talking to him in the evenings, telling him that Ripkin would be home soon and then he would have his "other" best friend there to comfort him. Finally Ripkin arrived and the two of them spend the days together, either at my house or once a week at day care with all their other friends.

Recently when I took both Trooper and Ripkin for a day of play at one of the local doggy day care facilities, Trooper showed one of the caregivers that he knows who his friends are. She had gone back to get three dogs, but only had two leads with her, so took Trooper and the other dog. As she started to walk towards the door leading to the lobby, Trooper pulled away from her and went back to the run where Ripkin was waiting and sat down

outside the gate. He refused to budge until she traded the other dog for Ripkin. He wasn't going to leave his best friend behind no matter what.

Trooper seems to have matured on a different level now. At four years old, he has physically reached his full growth potential, filling out in the chest this last year and reaching his full height. But I think that with the loss of Tink, it is as if he has suddenly "grown up". When we sit watching TV in the evenings, he seems more thoughtful and will often lean into me, putting his head on my leg or shoulder. As if… he is comforting me.

There will be another pug in our future, of that I am sure. Trooper misses his girl, misses his "pillow," and I miss her happy face when I come home. Once you are loved by a pug it is hard to not hear that snoring at night, and hard not to see that little curly tail wagging with joy at finding a dropped treat. We will find another little pug girl and she will also find us when the time is right. Soon I know we will be covered in pug snot and kisses. I have already picked out a name for her… Tián Xin—or Peaceful Heart in Chinese. It is a reflection of where our hearts are now.

Chapter 13

Lessons

Life's lessons are almost always hard ones. You never really know if you pass the test until you find yourself facing the same situation or lesson again. Then your options are to try the same thing you did before, or if you learned enough the first time, you get to make different choices the second time. There is a 12-Step definition of insanity that says it is doing the same things over and over again, but always expecting a different outcome. I hope that I've learned enough from my companion animals—and my life lessons—that I will be able to make different choices in the future. I almost wrote "better" choices, but as I said in the beginning of the book, sometimes you can't regret the choices you made because they almost always bring you right to where you are supposed to be—whether to learn a lesson again, or to try something different. "No matter where you go—there you are." I don't know who I would be if I hadn't made the choices I did in my past, but I'm fairly certain that I would still be making mistakes and still repeating some lessons.

The lessons I have learned from my companion animals have always been grounded in trust and love. There has been joy and laughter. Pain… yes… there has been pain—but always the pain of letting them go is with love as the basis. Never has a painful lesson with my animals been malicious. Unlike humans who all too often hurt each other with their words or actions.

My first pets taught me about friendship and responsibility. They were my friends when it was difficult for me to make friends in school because of how often the military moved us as I was growing up. They taught me how to be responsible—whether it was cleaning Greta's or Pete's cages, making sure that Bandit's litter box was clean, Brandy walked, or just keeping their

food and water bowls filled. They depended on me, and their health and welfare were my responsibility.

Midnight showed me that sometimes when we think we have lost all hope, miracles can happen. His reappearance after Andrea thought he was dead, and his absolute devotion to her that kept him alive when his burns could have killed him was nothing short of a miracle. Whenever I have felt like just giving up, I often think of Midnight and how he fought for life, alone and in a great deal of pain. I think of his will to live and tell myself that my struggles at times with insecurities and low self-esteem aren't anything that I can't overcome and that I must never give up on myself or my dreams.

Being forced to make a choice between my cat, Jazzmin, and Will's insecure ego taught me that I never wanted to be in that position again, nor would I ever issue an ultimatum to someone like that. Putting someone between a rock and a hard place—as Ryan's mother did to him when she told him he would have to choose between loving her and liking me—is cruel and unfair. Since that time, whenever someone has expected me to choose between them or someone or something else, I have usually chosen the person/thing/animal who didn't ask me to make a choice. There are no "sides" in life. The only other "side" to life is death, and that comes all too soon at times. I choose to be happy now, to surround myself with people, animals and things that make me happy and that accept me just as I am.

During a hurricane once, a stray dog taught me that every act of kindness is appreciated, no matter how random. The dog showed up just hours before the storm hit. Hot, thirsty and obviously panicked, he looked as if he had been on his own for a while. When I first saw him standing outside my door, acting as if he wanted to come in, I was hesitant. As I watched him, I could sense his trust and so walked out to him with bowls of water and food. When he was done eating I led him into my garage where he could wait out the storm. Two days later, when my vet's office reopened, I took him in for a checkup and eventually found him a home with a former co-worker who had recently lost a dog. He is now happy and healthy, successfully treated for heartworms that he had. I have since found a wooden plaque of a simple cat outline that was once used by hobos on the road to identify "kind hearted women" who might provide a meal or assistance to someone "riding the rails" or traveling by foot. I'm convinced that there must be a similar sign somewhere on my home that is only visible

to animals since the dog's appearance at my door that day would be hard to explain otherwise. I had never seen him before, and of all the doors in my townhouse complex, he chose the only one that would have opened to him.

Ebony has shown me the importance of spending time with friends, and Oreo has shown me that it's o.k. to get a little wild every now and then.

Tink taught me that every day I wake up is a day to be happy and I should be joyful. I should greet everyone as if they are the next best thing to a slice of cheese that has been accidentally dropped on the floor. A found treasure! She taught me that sometimes life is filled with pain, but if we get up anyway, put on a happy face, and spread a few pug kisses everywhere throughout our day… that we will get through it just fine. She taught me the importance of spending time with the ones we love, and about talking to them often—and most importantly—she and Snookums taught me how to listen with my heart, and to respect what someone else is trying to tell me—even if we aren't of the same species.

I have also learned that happiness comes from inside—not outside. People can be happy together, but not make each other happy. Sometimes they don't realize how happy they are because they are so "blinded by the forest" of possessions and material things, and think that their happiness comes from outside. I am happy now because I like who I am. I'm comfortable in my skin. I'm honest—with myself and with others. I respect myself and I can laugh at myself. I know I'm not perfect and I accept that. If I wasn't happy, I might still believe that I needed to change myself to fit someone else, or that my happiness could be found in things or other people. Now that I realize that I am happy, I've also realized that I'm ready to share that with someone else. To be happy with someone—not because of someone.

Mandy has taught me that everyone needs a hug at least once a day, and that it is o.k. to sometimes look at the world from a different perspective—like upside down! He teaches me that life is easier when you have a laid back attitude and that even when someone yells and complains for a long time, they can ultimately forgive you.

Forgiveness. That has been a huge lesson to learn. Believe it or not, it has been Trooper that has helped the most in learning about forgiveness. For him to learn to trust men again means that he has had to forgive the ones that "might" hurt him—he couldn't hold a grudge and hate all men just based on what two of them did. So for me to learn to trust men again, I have

had to forgive the ones that have hurt me. In forgiving, I—we—have also learned to open our hearts up to the potential for love and to trust again by not judging all others on the actions of a few.

I had conversations with friends not too long ago about forgiveness and love. Both of them are in marriages that are ending. Needless to say, they have had a lot of emotional roller coaster rides in the last few months. While their roles in the break-up of their marriages differ—one is filing and the other was on the receiving end of the divorce papers - there is one common thread in what caused the disintegration of their marriages. An inability to forgive past hurts has driven a wedge in their relationships that forced them apart. That to me just seems sad because I know that for the one in the relationship that was unable to forgive; until they learn to forgive —unconditionally—they will be forced to repeat this "lesson" again and again in all their future relationships. I see love and forgiveness as being intricately entwined together, and in a relationship, I don't think you can't have one without the other.

I believe that when I was forgiven by my Father, it was because He loved me unconditionally, and He forgave me unconditionally. There wasn't any small print at the bottom of the cross that said I was forgiven "only if…." I wasn't forgiven "only if " I was a specific religious denomination, race, gender, or sexual orientation. When you read this, please don't rush to your computer to fire off a letter to tell me how wrong I am. I don't profess to be a religious scholar or knowledgeable in any way about the vast assortment of world faiths. As a novice, it just seems to me that whatever your faith or belief system is, it probably has some basis of unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness. Isn't that what we all want? How much simpler could our lives be if we just lived on that premise? Of not only being able to forgive and love others unconditionally, but also and probably most importantly, being able to forgive and love ourselves unconditionally?

I have seen my companion animals seem to be able to let things go a lot quicker than humans do. Granted, if you abuse an animal long enough, they will probably snap. Literally and figuratively. But I don't think that is because they are holding some angry grudge at you. I think that it is because they associate the abuser with pain and fear, so they react on a subconscious level of "fight or flight." But for the most part, with animals that are humanely disciplined and are not abused, when they are released from being disciplined they can quickly go back to being a happy animal.

They will rebound with joy when they see you again and shower you with unconditional love.

Why can't we do that? Why can't we let go of things and just move forward with joy? When I look back at events in my life that have caused me pain or anger, I can often see how long I held onto those emotions and how they continued to cloud my thoughts until everything in my life felt like it was poisoned by that event. It is only when I released that pain or anger that I was able to move forward with joy. When I compare events that were caused by others or caused by myself—my own choices or mistakes—I can see that I was always able to forgive others much quicker than I could forgive myself.

I was finally able to forgive Will and move on with my life without carrying the baggage of that hurt anymore. When he called me out of the blue this year to wish me a Happy Birthday, we were able to talk—and laugh—for over an hour. That was the first time we had spoken in almost five years.

For so many years when I was in that abusive marriage I felt that it was always my fault. Aside from the fact that I was constantly told it was my fault by my husband, I told it to myself even more. Looking back even farther I can see how much my childhood influenced my low self-esteem. Always feeling unwanted, unloved, and alone. No wonder I sought out men who would just reinforce those feelings. My Dad was there in my life, but he wasn't really "there." He provided for us, put food on the table, a roof over our heads, but my first memory of him telling me he loved me is from when I was an adult and I said it first. I had no memories of him hugging me as a child, taking part in any school activities, or just being involved with us. I remember Volksmarches in Germany where he would set out at his own pace and leave the rest of us behind.

I once researched and wrote a term paper on emotional abandonment and its affects on children for an undergraduate child psychology class. In the course of my research I started to see myself in some of the case studies and I asked my Dad why he was never really "there" for our childhood. He was confused by what I meant and said that he raised us the same way that his father raised him. It dawned on me then that sometimes the emotional dysfunctions are so ingrained that a person never even realizes what they are missing, or what they have lost. They can't give what they never had.

An editor recently advised me that I needed to work on my “show don’t tell” experiences in this writing process—“actions speak louder than words.” Valuable advice, not just in writing but in life. I’m sure that my father loved me in his own way, but his actions never made me feel like I was loved or wanted and so I sought out that feeling from others using my father as a measure. It wasn’t until I was able to see that the measuring stick I was holding was dysfunctional that I realized I needed to find a new measure. One I created myself.

I still remember the day I picked up his ashes. I placed him on the passenger seat as we drove back to his house where the rest of the family was gathered, and I was overcome with emotion. All the things I had longed to hear from him, I would never hear. As I drove I poured out all the things I had tried to say to him when he was alive, the things he hadn’t wanted to hear—my fears, my hurts, my dreams, my goals—all the things I wished we had talked about. I told him how much he meant to me, and how I wished that we had been able to have a closer friendship the last few years of his life without his last girlfriend’s insecurities and jealousies getting in the way.

Laura hated me from the moment I moved back into town because she couldn’t stand not being the sole focus of all of his attention. I tried everything to become friends with her because she was such an important part of my father’s life, but nothing made any difference.

When I learned of her severe allergies to scents and perfumes, I stopped wearing all scented deodorants and hair products, seldom wore perfumes, and used only unscented laundry detergents and softeners because I never knew when I would get a last minute call inviting me to dinner—which I would jump at as an opportunity to spend time with my father.

Not long before he became to sick to work, he had started to “sneak around” just to have lunch with me—he would call me on his cell phone from a job site and ask if I could get away that day. After he was hospitalized I went to see him every day after work. One day he asked if I would check in with her to see if she needed anything, and so I called her on the way from the hospital to see if I could stop by (I had learned years before that stopping by unannounced was an unforgivable offense). When I got to her house, after we had talked for a few minutes she excused herself from the room and when she came back, there was an unmistakably strong scent in the room. I couldn’t identify what it was, but I panicked. Had I

slipped up? Forgotten that the coat I was wearing had been around someone else with perfume that might have rubbed off on me? I no longer even bought scented deodorants or hair styling products, and couldn't imagine what it was. I immediately made excuses and left her house, sniffing my jacket as soon as I got in the car to figure out what the scent was and where it had come from. By the time I got home, my phone was ringing. It was my father was calling. Yelling at me from his hospital bed about how could I be so insensitive to deliberately wear perfume to her house when I knew she was so allergic. I knew then that she had set me up. Whatever she did when she left the room was what caused the scent, and she was using it as another way to drive a wedge between my father and me.

When he was released from the hospital and began hospice care at her house, she would only allow me to come over to sit with him when he was unconscious from the morphine. I talked to him anyway, knowing that some part of him still heard me. The day he died—the day he was dying—she had known from early morning that it would be his last day. But she didn't call me until two hours after he had died.

The day after he died, she said that she needed to tell me the truth. I was a bad daughter. I didn't love my father enough.

I knew even before I had completely digested her words that she was speaking from grief and anger. I also knew that getting into an argument with her would be pointless. She had needed to hurt me one more time to show that she was better than me, and if that was what she needed to get to 129 sleep that night, then good on her. I wanted to yell at her that I had loved him enough to let her win, to not argue when she had lied to him so many times about things that I had said or done that drove a wedge between us. I wanted to scream at her that I loved him enough to want him to be happy and so I stepped back out of his life and settled for whatever time I could get. But I said and did none of that.

I told her I was sorry for her loss, sorry that she was hurting so much, and that I did love him more than she would ever understand, and then I walked away from her.

Talking to my father's ashes in the car that day, I forgave him for the hurts of my childhood, knowing that he had missed out on knowing love from his father as well and that it had been hard for him to show his emotions because if it. I forgave him for feeling forced to choose between his girlfriend and me, and that he had chosen her. I also forgave her for all

the things she had said and done to keep us apart. I felt sorry for her, knowing that her own childhood must have been so lonely and insecure that she had to cling to whatever she could just to feel whole.

Forgiveness. It heals. It lightens your burdens, and casts off that baggage that keeps you from growing and feeling joy. Baggage that is better left at the curb.

Chapter 14

Carry-on Baggage

I started to look at what kind of emotional "baggage" I wanted to carry into my future. Did I want oversized and overweight baggage that was always going to hold me back from experiencing love and joy? Baggage that was going to cost me more than it was worth just to bring it along? I knew that I needed to start to purge the things that I had packed. Try on those emotional clothes and decide what fit, and what could be trashed. Decide what was in style and what was out of style. I needed to decide what was really important, what emotions I could just not live without. I would especially have to forgive the things I still blamed myself for, the self-images that I was never good enough. Hanging onto those thoughts and feelings was only hurting me.

Fortunately the realization that I could forgive myself and "lighten my load" had started when I was working on my MBA—so I'd already had about eight years to work on forgiving myself and others by then. Time I really needed actually since some forgiveness wasn't as easily given as I thought at first it would be. As I began to receive acceptance and approval from outside sources, I started to look at myself as they saw me and began to accept and approve of myself. I began to forgive myself and others, like myself, and eventually love myself.

I realized that life was too short to spend it praying for death all the time and that I really didn't want to be in such a hurry to get to the end of my story.

It wasn't an easy thing to do, and didn't happen over night. Some hurts I wanted to hang on to because they had been packed for so long that they conformed to the shape of the bag now. I had to pull some things out of the bag more than once because they always seemed to find a way back in. I

sought counseling when certain issues reappeared, especially after the death of my father.

There were the “stupid” shirts that I had packed in several sizes, especially after my marriage to Marc. Those were finally gone when I realize that I wasn’t the only one he conned into thinking he was a great guy. He had even fooled my family and friends before we got married. I’ve also “wised up” and realize that when I see a red flag—I need to pay attention to it, no matter how small it may be. In spite of what it cost me financially, I have been able to forgive him for using me and betraying my trust in him.

When Marc and Ryan moved out, I chose to give them almost half of the furniture in the house—regardless of the fact that we hadn’t been married long enough for him to have deserved half of anything if we had to fight about it in court. It was furniture he hadn’t bought, and in some cases, I was still paying for it. But I considered it a “Good Will” donation to purge my home of the things (baggage) that would remind me of them. It was just “things” and “things” can always be replaced if necessary. It was my self-esteem that was harder to replace, and to start doing that, I needed to walk the higher road and not be hateful and vindictive.

That “you’d be a horrible mom” apron that I was forced to wear for so many years… I left it behind when I left California. I won’t ever get the chance to be a bio-mom now, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be the most Awesome Aunt that ever walked in the South. And I was a “mom” in a way when I bottle raised Oreo, and helped Chynna give birth to her puppies. Maybe I should have called this book “All My Kids Have Hairy Legs.”

My home isn’t always perfectly spotless, but my true friends don’t mind and they always feel welcome and comfortable here. So comfortable that I have some friends who come over for a visit and often wind up falling asleep on the sofa. I’m told that is a compliment. I haven’t killed anyone with my cooking—and I even have a spoon rest and new apron that say that! When I throw parties my house is filled with friends and laughter. I don’t often have too many leftovers when everyone leaves, and no one goes home hungry.

It has taken a while to finally feel like my “baggage” will fit under the seat in front of me, or in an overhead bin. I no longer worry about having all that excess “baggage” that had to be checked at the gate. Considering the changes in air travel costs… that is probably a good thing!

I don’t waste space in my bag, in my heart or my mind, on anger, judgment, hate or fear. Now my carry-on bag just has room for forgiveness, love, acceptance, and laughter. I’ve learned that life is better being able to laugh at myself instead of hating myself. When I had my annual neighborhood Christmas party less than three weeks after my retinal tear, I wrote “Ho, Ho, Ho” on my eye patch for the night. When I was planning my wedding to Marc, I had the church’s wedding co-ordinator almost in a panic when I told her I wanted to change the theme to a pirate wedding so I could wear a black eye patch. It was a week before she believed that I was just kidding.

My house is filled with humorous and meaningful plaques and artwork that remind me to respect myself and others, but mostly, to enjoy and laugh at life.

But the one that I have in my bedroom—that I look at every morning when I wake up and every night before I go to sleep—the one that reminds me of what is most important to remember—is an art print from Terri St. Cloud that says “I will not allow myself to be less than I am to meet anyone’s expectations.”

No, never again.

I trust enough to finally make myself available again to date. I’ve dropped hints to friends, family and neighbors that I’m interested in meeting new friends if they know of any nice, single men (yes that was probably an oxymoron) and where things go from there who knows.

I even went on a date the other night. My first since my divorce almost two years ago, so technically my first in over four years if you count Marc being the last person I dated. It was fun, we played pool, darts, and I got to hear him sing karaoke. But for some reason though, he didn’t mention the fact that he had a girlfriend he was living with before he asked me out.

Big Red Flag.

Why would a man who was living with his girlfriend… Flirt with me? Ask me out? Try at first to tell me she was “just” his roommate when she had called him three times in an hour?

But no worries, I didn’t have any expectations for the evening except to get out and have fun, so I wasn’t disappointed.

Dating in the 21st century as a 40-something is so different from dating in the 80’s when I was 20-something. Then, I just wanted to find someone

to “love” me, and I’ll be the first to admit that when I was 20-something, I didn’t have a clue what love was.

Now, we all have some kind of “baggage” to consider—divorces, children, grandchildren, or elderly parents to take care of. One of my best girl friends is two years younger than me, and raising her four grandchildren alone. Another is dealing with sick parents. Dating now I have to wonder if someone I’m serious about practices safe sex and whether or not he has always practiced safe sex! I have to wonder whether or not he will show up on some criminal list if I Google him. The stories I could tell of the men I dated even before I met Marc… but that will be another book….

Trooper is much happier and more relaxed now. He has a healthy attitude about meeting new people. He no longer tries to run, and accepts new friends much faster than ever before. Recently we were out walking and a neighbor asked if I had jumper cables he could borrow. I went to get them, and I left Trooper off leash in the field across from our house while my neighbor watched him. As I rummaged around in the trunk of my car, I could hear my neighbor talking and walking closer. I turned and saw Trooper. With his head high and searching he had crossed the street to look for me, certain that I was in danger and needed his protection when he realized I was not in sight. I called to him, and he came to me. Happy that I was there. Happy that I was o.k.

He is my protector, my companion, my best friend.

I have a necklace that I wear occasionally it is a pewter pendant with a heart cut into it and says “I Am a Survivor.”

I am. We are. The light shines in us again. Our “peaceful hearts” glow with the joy of knowing that we are happy and content with who we are. We are loved. We are wanted. We are not alone.

I recently started doing something every time I go out to eat alone. As I’m eating, I will look around the restaurant and will pick a table to pay for their meals anonymously. The wait staff are sworn to secrecy and instructed to simply tell them that someone decided to bless them today and pay for their meals. It has brought tears to an elderly couples’ eyes, and to a wife dining out with her disabled husband. I have seen smiles of gratitude on more than one single mother struggling to treat her children to a night out. It has made a table of military members returning from deployment, and a table of two police officers taking a break during their shift feel appreciated

for their work and sacrifices. It has also given the wait staff at the restaurant a part of the blessing that comes with giving unconditionally. I've seen a tired, overworked waiter or waitress suddenly feel a little less stressed after they tell their table that they have been blessed. They smile more, laugh more, and the atmosphere in the whole restaurant seems lighter. Even I have felt lighter—and brighter.

I think sometimes we all let the worries of this world dim our light. We carry too much baggage or too many burdens on our shoulders. We forget that we don't have to carry it all alone. As I was driving to work one morning I prayed with gratitude for the tiny bunnies I saw on my drive that brought a smile to my face. Watching them nibbling at the grass at the side of the road, I felt blessed to realize that even those mornings when I didn't see them, I knew that they were still there, in the shadows of the bushes. The thought occurred to me that those days that I felt unloved, unwanted, and alone I was never truly alone. Never truly unloved or unwanted. Just because I could not see it at that moment, it did not mean that it was not there. The bunnies are a reminder to me that regardless of what other people have said or done to me, I am loved. I am wanted. I am not alone. I may not know yet what my life will be like or how I can serve His purpose, but I do believe that I am here for His reasons. Even if He remains in the shadows and I do not see His hand in my every day life, there are times when I can see, and feel, His light shining through me as I bless others.

This is my hope for this book and for telling my—our—story. I hope that it has blessed you to believe that you are not alone, unwanted or unloved. I hope that it lets you see the light inside of you again, and that it helps you to feel lighter, and brighter. I hope that you will reach out to bless someone else with words or actions and that in blessing others, you will be blessed tenfold. Believe. Find your light. Shine. Share your light. Be blessed.